YOUR GUIDE TO THE NFL SEASON

GRIDIRON

2026 PREVIEW

BRANDON AUBREY
SEVEN MILLION DOLLAR MAN

STARS IN STRIPES
BENGALS REBUILD

RED ALERT

IS THE 49ERS' SUPER BOWL WINDOW STILL OPEN FOR **CHRISTIAN MCCAFFREY**?

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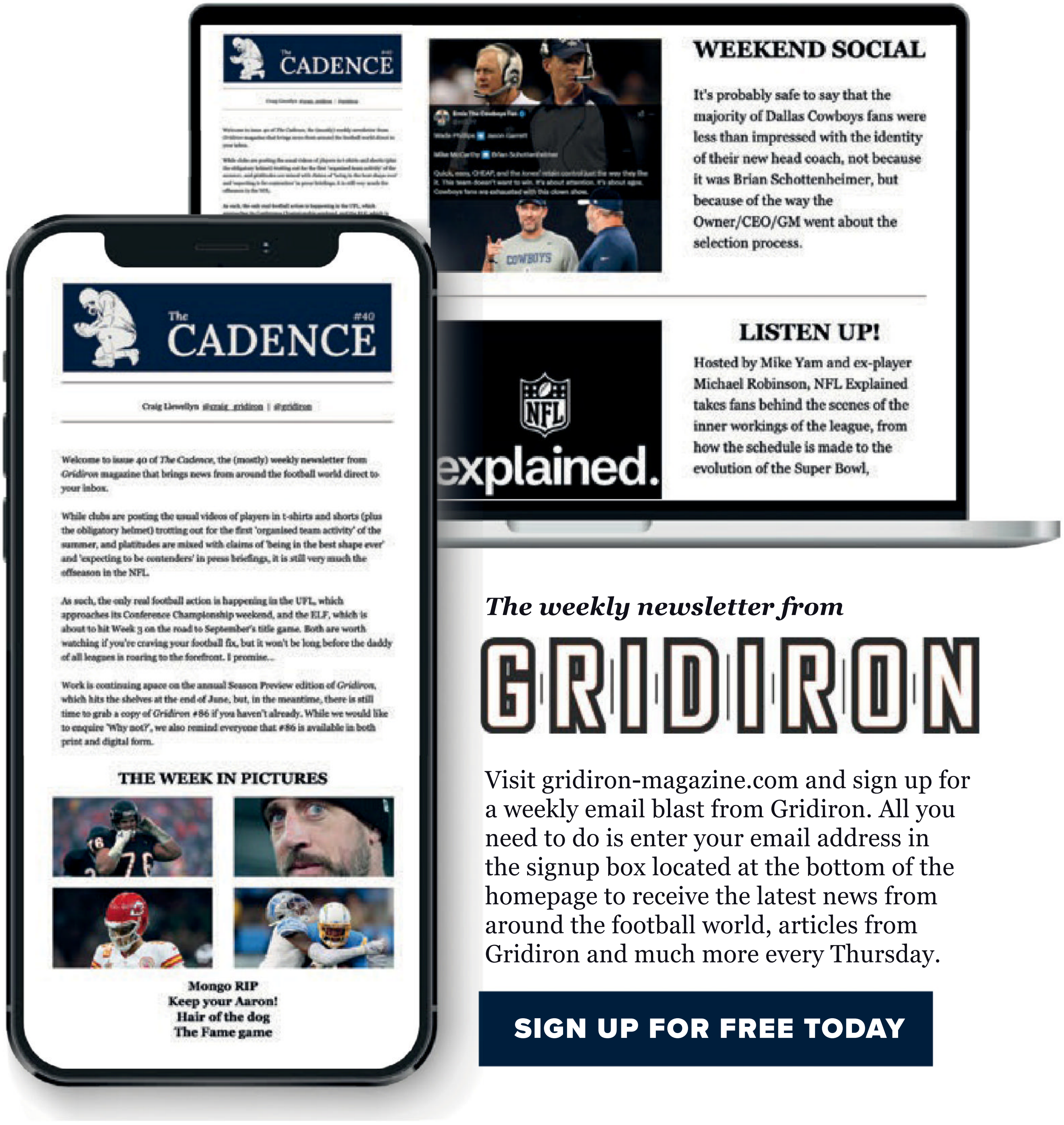

The CADENCE #40

Craig Llewellyn @craig_gridiron | @gridiron

Welcome to issue 40 of *The Cadence*, the (mostly) weekly newsletter from *Gridiron* magazine that brings news from around the football world direct to your inbox.

While clubs are posting the usual videos of players in t-shirts and shorts (plus the obligatory helmet) trotting out for the first 'organised team activity' of the summer, and platitudes are mixed with claims of 'being in the best shape ever' and 'expecting to be contenders' in press briefings, it is still very much the offseason in the NFL.

As such, the only real football action is happening in the UFL, which approaches its Conference Championship weekend, and the ELF, which is about to hit Week 3 on the road to September's title game. Both are worth watching if you're craving your football fix, but it won't be long before the daddy of all leagues is roaring to the forefront. I promise...

Work is continuing apace on the annual Season Preview edition of *Gridiron*, which hits the shelves at the end of June, but, in the meantime, there is still time to grab a copy of *Gridiron* #86 if you haven't already. While we would like to enquire 'Why not?', we also remind everyone that #86 is available in both print and digital form.

THE WEEK IN PICTURES

Mongo RIP
Keep your Aaron!
Hair of the dog
The Fame game

WEEKEND SOCIAL

It's probably safe to say that the majority of Dallas Cowboys fans were less than impressed with the identity of their new head coach, not because it was Brian Schottenheimer, but because of the way the Owner/CEO/GM went about the selection process.

LISTEN UP!

Hosted by Mike Yam and ex-player Michael Robinson, NFL Explained takes fans behind the scenes of the inner workings of the league, from how the schedule is made to the evolution of the Super Bowl,

The weekly newsletter from

GRIDIRON

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REEL TO REAL

Hollywood has always known how to tell a story, be it heroes rising from obscurity or villains returning for one final act, and, usually, every great script leads to a showdown where there can be only one winner.

The NFL will hope for exactly that when the Super Bowl returns to SoFi Stadium on Sunday, February 14th, 2027. Five years after Los Angeles last hosted the biggest game of the season, and where central casting found the perfect leading man in Aaron Donald, the league returns to its most modern backdrop, in a stadium built for occasions of this magnitude — and this sequel begins with no shortage of blockbuster storylines.

The defending champion Seattle Seahawks open the season carrying the weight of expectation after lifting the Lombardi Trophy in Super Bowl LX, and Mike Macdonald's team know that doing so again will be an entirely different challenge. The NFC is hardly short of contenders, as the Philadelphia Eagles remain loaded with talent, Ben Johnson's Chicago Bears have picked up the cudgel for the North division and, even after periods of transition, the San Francisco 49ers remain too good to ignore. However, in a reprise of 2022, could it be Sean McVay's Los Angeles Rams once again going for gold on home turf?

Over in the AFC, the cast list is no less impressive, with the New England Patriots already sweating on a callback to take another run at Lombardi number seven. Josh Allen's Buffalo Bills continue to search for a plot twist that would turn perennial contention into a championship, while Lamar Jackson and the Baltimore Ravens know that the clock is ticking on their chances. Likewise, while the window for Joe Burrow and the Cincinnati Bengals remains ajar, no-one should write off Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs as they look to script a redemption story from the ashes of an injury-hit 2025 campaign.

And then there is Pittsburgh, where Aaron Rodgers enters a farewell tour seeking a final scene that ends with him on top of the world as the closing credits roll.

Beyond the hopes and hashmarks, the NFL's location list continues to expand with an international schedule that takes in London, Madrid, Melbourne, Rio de Janeiro, Munich, Paris and Mexico City. And yet, while every big picture season begins with a screenplay, experience suggests the script won't even survive the opening act as surprise contenders emerge, heavyweights stumble and relative unknowns rise to battle the household names looking to rediscover past glories.

That, dear reader, is the beauty of the NFL.

SUPER BOWL LVI
SoFi Stadium
#SBLVI
RAMS

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EDITOR'S NOTES

CRAIG LLEWELLYN

EDITOR *@craig_gridiron*

It might be an age thing, but the print deadline for *Gridiron*'s NFL season preview seems to come around quicker every year.

By the time you read these words, the first steps on the road to Super Bowl LXI in Los Angeles will be measured in mere weeks. But, while the destination is the same for everyone, there are almost certainly several different routes that will be followed en route to Hollywood next February.

That's the beauty of the NFL. Twelve months ago, few would have predicted the storylines that would come to define the 2025 campaign, as football has an uncanny ability to make fools of certainties and heroes of outsiders. That's why we love it. Every September begins with hope and every February ends with history (and a fair share of frustration and disappointment too). There can only be one winner which, in the case of the NFL, means 31 losers left to lick their wounds.

Of course, the Seattle Seahawks enter the 2026 campaign with a second Lombardi Trophy in the case, following their Super Bowl LX victory over the New England Patriots in Santa Clara, and a rematch between those two opponents will kick off the new season in the Pacific Northwest on the first Wednesday of September.

As expected, that game features prominently in Neil Dutton's selection of 26 must-sees for the 2026 season, but this issue is so much more than that as we try to capture the sense of possibility that accompanies every NFL preseason. As usual in this bumper 132-page offering, we examine every team and every division, before assessing the likely contenders and pretenders in our Power Rankings, but it's the stories behind the standings that intrigue us the most.

From the top, we ask, via interviews with new signings Bryan Cook and Boye Mafe, whether Cincinnati's defensive makeover will be enough to help quarterback Joe Burrow and the offense drag the Bengals back to the Super Bowl? Likewise, has the Denver duo of Paton and Payton done enough retooling on both sides of the ball to ensure the Broncos are in a position to go one game further than last season.

To round out our AFC content, Tom Ritchie's examination of Daniel Jones' rise and subsequent fall in Indianapolis explores one of this year's most compelling comeback stories, as the QB attempts to recover from an Achilles injury in time to prove that his 8-2 start to 2025 was no fluke.

Over on the NFC side, we speak exclusively to Dallas Cowboys' kicker Brandon Aubrey, in the wake of his record-setting contract, to determine whether the specialist position is becoming more of an offensive weapon than ever before. And, in keeping with our efforts to feature different franchises in this edition every year, we home in on the New Orleans Saints, as Chris Winterburn details their efforts to go from worst to first in the NFC South and make an unexpected push for glory.

Last, but by no means least given that he is this year's cover star, our 49ers insider Nicholas McGee evaluates whether Christian McCaffrey remains San Francisco's main reason for Lombardi optimism as an ageing roster watches its window for winning it all slowly close with every passing season.

Of course, it's not all about the NFL and, elsewhere in these pages, we look ahead to a landmark year for the college game. From Arthur Kingdom's remarkable trans-Atlantic journey to the excitement surrounding college football's return to London and Simon Clancy's Top 25 prospects to watch, the future of the sport is as vibrant as ever.

Putting together a season preview is always an exercise in balancing ambition with humility. We spend weeks and months researching and writing, fully aware that the NFL delights in ripping up predictions by Week 3. But that's part of the fun, and perhaps one of the reasons why this issue remains one of our favourites. Before the injuries, before the hot takes and the inevitable declarations that somebody's season is already over, this is football in its clearest form.

Thirty-two teams. Thirty-two dreams. And everybody convinced this could be their year. Some might be right. Most won't be. But that's never stopped us, as fans, from believing before.

As always, thank you for your support. Whether you've been a loyal *Gridiron* subscriber for years or only picked up the magazine for the first time today, we're grateful to share the time with you.

The road to Los Angeles starts here.

Craig Llewellyn,
Editor

VIEW TO A KILL

Three years without a playoff appearance have forced Cincinnati into unfamiliar territory. With Joe Burrow's patience tested and their Super Bowl window narrowing, the Bengals have finally pushed their chips to the middle of the table.

YOU READY FOR THIS? THIS IS THE MIC DROP RIGHT HERE

THE NEW LONG GAME

Brandon Aubrey's remarkable rise from soccer pro to the NFL's highest-paid kicker is changing how teams view football's once overlooked position.

THEY DIDN'T WANT TO GIVE US THE BALL BACK ANYWHERE ON THE FIELD

NO TIME TO REST

Christian McCaffrey's unique talents make him indispensable but, entering his tenth NFL campaign, can the 49ers protect him enough to keep their Super Bowl window ajar?

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Neil Dutton has been poring over the 2026 NFL schedule to piece together his recommended watch list for the coming season.

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Each of the 32 NFL teams assessed ahead of the 2026 campaign, complete with players to follow and regular season fixture guides.

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Are defensive upgrades the answer to whatever ails the Cincinnati Bengals in their pursuit of a championship? Lee Campbell investigates.

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His first season in Indianapolis was going swimmingly, until it wasn't. Can mercurial QB Daniel Jones overcome injury and pick up where he left off in 2025?

48 PATON & PAYTON

Denver's GM and head coach now have matching deals, but Alex Evans asks whether they have what it takes, on the field, to win it all.

62 WE HAVE THE POWER

Designed to provoke comment (and undoubtedly some outrage), we present *Gridiron*'s preseason pecking order.

72 JUST FOR KICKS

Brandon Aubrey's offseason payday reflects a new era in which NFL kickers are making defensive coordinators re-evaluate everything.

88 SAINTS ALIVE?

After their unexpected run to end last season, Chris Winterburn asks whether the New Orleans Saints are a legitimate threat in 2026.

102 RUN THE CLOCK

Are the San Francisco 49ers able to keep their Super Bowl window open long enough to get do-it-all RB Christian McCaffrey a ring?

118 KNIGHTED KINGDOM

British linebacker Arthur Kingdom has his sights set on the Big 12 — and woe betide anyone that gets in his way.

MOMENT OF THE OFFSEASON

RAM RAID

(OR A TALE OF TWO BROWNS)

June 1st would be largely unremarkable were it not for the NFL calendar dropping a convenient waypoint on that date. Since the 2006 Collective Bargaining Agreement added provision for players to be designated as post-June 1st roster cuts and still participate in the lucrative part of free agency, as well as allowing teams to spread the salary cap hit from said player's signing bonus over two years instead of taking it all at once, the day has earned added football significance.

This year, June 1st was anticipated to be the day on which A.J. Brown's exit from Philadelphia would finally be confirmed, with the New England Patriots his likely destination in a pre-arranged trade. The move happened, reuniting Brown with his former Tennessee Titans HC, Mike Vrabel, but was completely overshadowed by another, unexpected, deal.

Myles Garrett's on-off relationship with the Cleveland Browns has been well-documented. After going 3–14 in 2024, Garrett requested a trade, citing a 'desire to win', but eventually agreed on a four-year, $160m contract extension, complete with no-trade clause, ostensibly keeping him with the Browns through 2030. He duly reset the league's single-season sack record at 23 last season and appeared on course to suit up for Cleveland in 2026.

Then June 1st dawned, and Garrett found himself the subject of a shock deal between Cleveland and the Los Angeles Rams, who again reverted to 'F- dem picks' mode in search of another Lombardi, sending Jared Verse and a hatful of future draft capital to Ohio in order to get their man. Already early preseason favourites, L.A. might now be even closer to another Super Bowl win on home turf.

HYUNDAI
LOS ANGELES
RAMS
RAMS

26 MUST-SEE GAMES IN 2026

With rematches, rivalries and more, the 2026 NFL schedule looks set to be a cracker. **Neil Dutton** gives us the lowdown on the 26 games no-one should miss in 2026.

WEEK 1 New England Patriots @ Seattle Seahawks

Wednesday 9th September 2026

The 2026 regular season starts the same way that 2025 ended, with a Super Bowl rematch in the Pacific Northwest.

WEEK 1 San Francisco 49ers @ Los Angeles Rams

Thursday 10th September 2026

Always required watching, but even more so when it comes from the historic Melbourne Cricket Ground as the first ever NFL regular season game 'down under'.

WEEK 3 Baltimore Ravens @ Dallas Cowboys

Sunday 27th September 2026

The Ravens and Cowboys face off to the rhythm of the samba beat, as the NFL heads to Rio de Janeiro's Estádio do Maracanã for the first time.

WEEK 4 Indianapolis Colts @ Washington Commanders

Sunday 4th October 2026

London is calling the Colts and Commanders as the first game in the UK's annual triple-header takes place at Tottenham.

WEEK 4 New England Patriots @ Buffalo Bills

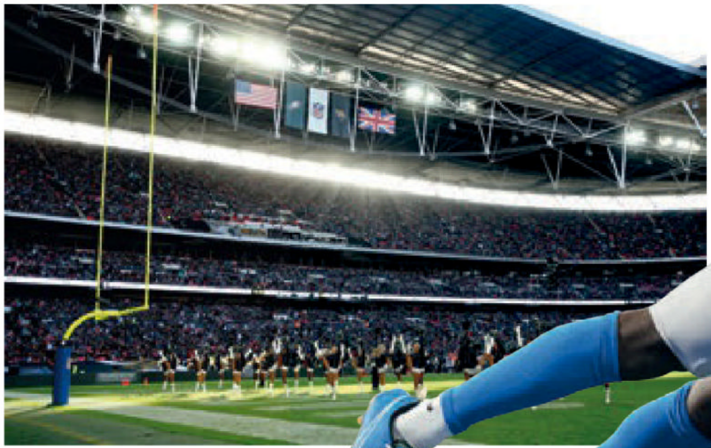
Sunday 4th October 2026

The Bills ceded control of the AFC East to the Super Bowl-bound Patriots last season. Can Drake Maye lay down an early 2026 marker over Josh Allen?

WEEK 5 Philadelphia Eagles @ Jacksonville Jaguars

Sunday 11th October 2026

Two sides who met on UK shores in 2018 meet again, this time at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium as Jacksonville host the first of back-to-back home games in London.



WEEK 5 Denver Broncos @ Los Angeles Chargers

Sunday 11th October 2026

Denver snapped Kansas City's hold on the division last season, while the Chargers continue to grow under Jim Harbaugh. This could be an early indicator in a three-way battle for the AFC West.

WEEK 6 Seattle Seahawks @ Denver Broncos

Thursday 15th October 2026

The Broncos nightmare early schedule continues with the reigning champs as two of the best NFL defenses play out what might have been in Super Bowl LX.

WEEK 7 Pittsburgh Steelers @ New Orleans Saints

Sunday 25th October 2026

Another fixture first for the 2026 season, with the Steelers and Saints clashing at the Stade de France in Paris as France hosts its first-ever NFL regular season fixture.

WEEK 7 Green Bay Packers @ Detroit Lions

Sunday 25th October 2026

Two NFC North powerhouses who will have plenty to say in the race for the division title meet in the Motor City to keep pace with Chicago.

WEEK 8 Chicago Bears @ Seattle Seahawks

Monday 2nd November 2026

The Bears generated the buzz in 2025, but it was Seattle who took home the silverware. Can Caleb Williams light up the Dark Side and show that Chicago has what it takes to land a Lombardi?

WEEK 9 Cincinnati Bengals @ Atlanta Falcons

Sunday 8th November 2026

The Bengals are back on the 'plane for their first International Series game in seven years, as Joe Burrow's boys take on the Falcons at Madrid's Bernabeu Stadium.

WEEK 10 New England Patriots @ Detroit Lions

Sunday 15th November 2026

The NFL's European adventure culminates in Munich, as the Lions 'host' the Patriots in WR Amon-Ra St.Brown's adopted home and country of his mother's birth.

WEEK 11 Minnesota Vikings @ San Francisco 49ers

Sunday 23rd November 2026

Another International Series game, and another for the 49ers as they head south of the border to take on the Vikings in Mexico City's return to the schedule.

WEEK 12
THANKSGIVING

Green Bay Packers @ Los Angeles Rams

Wednesday 25th November 2026

Chicago Bears @ Detroit Lions

Philadelphia Eagles @ Dallas Cowboys

Kansas City Chiefs @ Buffalo Bills

Thursday 26th November 2026

Denver Broncos @ Pittsburgh Steelers

Friday 27th November 2026

The NFL is giving football fans plenty to be thankful for during the Holiday Season, with the first-ever Thanksgiving Eve game kicking off Week 12 as the Packers face the Rams. The traditional Thursday triple-header presents two divisional match-ups before potentially the best QBs in the NFL trade blows in the night game. Still haven't had your football fix? Then the Black Friday game between the Steelers and Broncos should set you right.

WEEK 13 Kansas City Chiefs at Los Angeles Rams

Thursday 3rd December 2026

Patrick Mahomes again, this time locking horns with one of the league's best offensive minds, as the Chiefs and Rams look to reprise their thrilling 2018 score-fest.

WEEK 15 Seattle Seahawks @ Philadelphia Eagles

Saturday 19th December 2026

Saturday night might be alright for fighting as the two most recent Super Bowl winners face off in the City of Brotherly Love as a perfect birthday present for your humble author (No gifts please, this game is all I need)

WEEK 15 Baltimore Ravens @ Pittsburgh Steelers

Sunday 20th December 2026

On the face of it, this game might not mean too much in the grand scheme of things, but it's the first in this epic rivalry without either John Harbaugh or Mike Tomlin on the sidelines since 2006.

WEEK 16
CHRISTMAS

Houston Texans @ Philadelphia Eagles

Thursday 24th December 2026

'Twill be the night before Christmas and, all throughout town, Eagles fans will be stirring to welcome the Texans to the Linc in 'traditional' Philly fashion.

Friday 25th December 2026

Green Bay Packers @ Chicago Bears

Buffalo Bills @ Denver Broncos

Los Angeles Rams @ Seattle Seahawks

The NFL's Christmas cracker is a triple-header, with three old school rivalry games to help wash down the turkey and fight off the pudding-induced nap as the Packers visit the Bears, the Bills look to take down the Broncos and Myles Garrett's Rams extend no goodwill to Mike Macdonald's Seahawks. Ho, ho, ho!

BUFFALO BILLS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Terry Pegula	Brandon Beane	Joe Brady	Highmark Stadium	12-5 (Lost in Divisional Round)

VERDICT

Sean McDermott's shock exit reflects Buffalo's championship urgency; success depends on new HC Joe Brady adapting quickly.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★★
OFFENSE:	★★★★★
DEFENSE:	★★★★★
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

Josh Allen always gives a team a chance at a Super Bowl. He is one of the best we've seen in the NFL, and the franchise needs to cherish him. A newly aggressive defensive set-up may prove to be the thing which gets Buffalo over the line. They have to try something.

THE CASE AGAINST

Fatigue from always falling just short can set into a franchise with as many near-misses as the Bills. Sean McDermott revitalised the team, and his exit may well do more harm than good. Starting to play a new scheme could take something away from what the Bills have been doing well. There is an unknown about a coaching change.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

D.J. Moore, WR; Bradley Chubb, LB; Dee Alford, DB; Kyle Allen, QB; Mecole Hardman, WR; Demetrius Flannigan-Fowles, LB; Shane Zylstra, TE; Mike Danna, DE; Damar Hamlin, S; Trent Sherfield, WR; Lloyd Cushenberry, C; Austin Corbett, C; Geno Stone, DB; Mitch Wishnowsky, P;

OUT

Dane Jackson, CB; Curtis Samuel, WR; Taron Johnson, CB; Taylor Rapp, S; Daryl Porter Jr

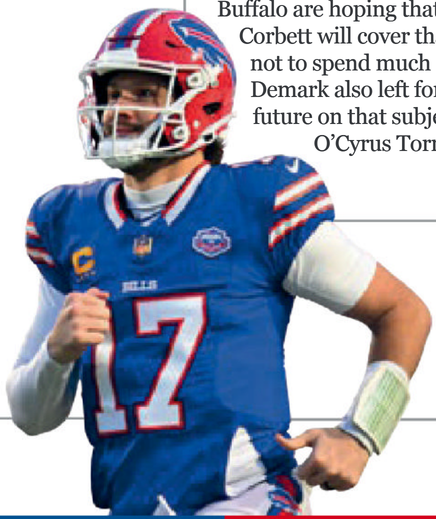
DRAFT

R2, P35	T.J. Parker, DE
R2, P62	Davison Igbinosun, CB
R4, P102	Jude Bowry, T
R4, P125	Skyler Bell, WR
R4, P126	Kaleb Elarms-Orr, LB
R5, P167	Jalon Kilgore, S
R5, P181	Zane Durant, DT
R7, P220	Toriano Pride Jr, CB
R7, P239	Tommy Doman, P
R7, P241	Ar'maj Reed-Adams, G

OFFENSE

Buffalo's offense has been consistently excellent since Josh Allen arrived. He continues to lead an extremely talented group that has been strengthened with the trade for wideout D.J. Moore. Mecole Hardman has been an explosive receiver in the past and recovering that form could take the Bills up a notch. Much of the off-season work has been on reshaping a receiving corps that can help Allen deliver a championship. Tweaks were needed over wholesale change and, if Moore can find his best form, this may be Allen's strongest offense for a number of years. Reggie Gilliam's departure may weaken the run game however.

In terms of the offensive line, losing David Edwards is a significant blow, but Buffalo are hoping that the veteran presence of both Lloyd Cushenberry and Austin Corbett will cover that loss. Fans may be slightly concerned that the team elected not to spend much money on the O-Line this offseason, especially as Ryan Van Demark also left for Minnesota. There may be an element of looking to the future on that subject, though, with Buffalo trying to ensure they can retain O'Cyrus Torrence on a long-term basis.



KEY STAT

Josh Allen holds the longest active starting streak in the NFL with the QB currently on a run of 139 consecutive appearances.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 17	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 12	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7.	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 9
AT	VS	VS	VS	AT	AT	BYE	VS	AT

CEILING: *SUPER BOWL CHAMPIONS*

DEFENSE

Buffalo's defensive personnel are elite but, in 2025, they underperformed and were unable to protect against the run to the standard expected of a Super Bowl contender. This offseason has been about strengthening that aspect of the defense. Bradley Chubb arrived as a premium pass rusher, but the interior core of Ed Oliver and Deone Walker need to stop opponents' ground games better in 2026. This defense does have explosive energy. They can disrupt plays with ease and this may stop rush-heavy teams from building a rhythm against them. A new coaching voice may be exactly what they need.

Sean McDermott utilised a nickel-base defense in Buffalo, but that is changing with his exit. You can expect Jim Leonhard to run a different scheme, which will prove to be far more aggressive and proactive. This will benefit Chubb, who is coming off the back of an impressive season where he registered 8.5 sacks. Buffalo need that drive to get to opposing quarterbacks after they finished 2025 ranked 20th for sacks. In the modern NFL, that simply isn't enough for a championship hopeful.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

7

Number of consecutive winning seasons is best active streak in NFL

950

Bills ran the fewest plays on defense in 2025

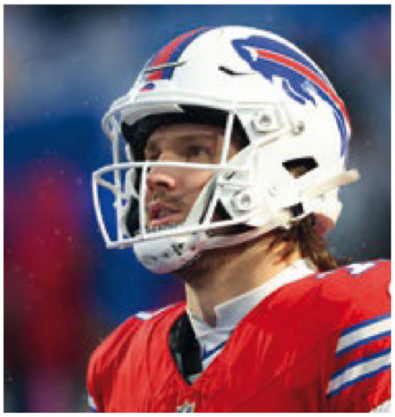
92

The lowest QB rating for Josh Allen in six seasons

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

It's impossible to predict whether the Bills can win the Super Bowl, but 2026 feels like the year it all comes together and they make the big game. Josh Allen is too good and the roster is too strong to fall short again, especially in a weakened AFC with Kansas City in transition.

STAR MAN



JOSH ALLEN
QB

Arguably the best quarterback in football, Allen continues to perform to an exceptionally high level and drags his team-mates along with him. A championship seems almost inevitable, but other greats have fallen short in this endeavour. Regardless of whether he can propel the Bills back to the big game, however, Allen will almost certainly be an MVP candidate.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

D.J. MOORE
WR

Moore is a veteran who has intermittently been amongst the NFL's best receivers. While he has been a part of some under-performing teams, and seen his numbers struggle as a result, when the Chicago Bears began to roll in 2025, Moore flattered to deceive. If he can play to his limit in Buffalo, however, Allen has a clear WR1 for a Super Bowl push.

HEAT INDEX

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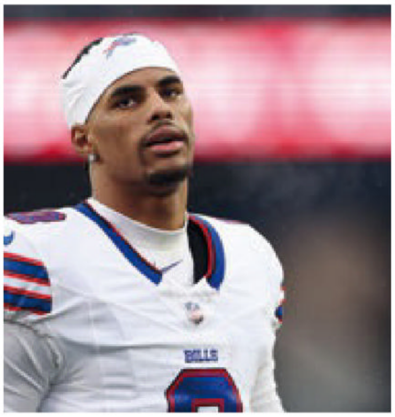


KEON COLEMAN
WR

Bills fans have been perpetually waiting for Coleman to become their standout receiver but, despite being tipped as a future star at Florida State, they have yet to see the best of him. With D.J. Moore having jumped in ahead of him in the pecking order, Coleman now has to show out... otherwise there won't be a contract extension despite the GM's support.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 26	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 19	WK 16. Dec 25	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	VS	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS

FLOOR: *WILDCARD ROUND DEFEAT*

MIAMI DOLPHINS

OWNER
Stephen M. Ross

GM
Jon-Eric Sullivan

HEAD COACH
Jeff Hafley

STADIUM
Hard Rock Stadium

2025 RECORD
7-10

VERDICT Reshaped coaching staff and roster, but 2026 will still be an uphill battle.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★★
OFFENSE:	★★★☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★☆☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★☆☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

A rejuvenated group without the egos that previous star players brought could bond quickly and adapt to a more rigid scheme. Jeff Hafley will be clear in what he wants from his players, and they have something to prove.

THE CASE AGAINST

Malik Willis still has a lot to prove as a starting QB. A more rigid system can also hamstring some players, and there will be a lot of defensive changes to learn and adjust to quickly. Miami are also in a division with both the New England Patriots and the Buffalo Bills.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Malik Willis, QB; Josh Uche, EDGE; Charlie Heck, T; David Ojabo, LB; Jalen Tolbert, WR; Tutu Atwell, WR; Jamaree Salyer, G/T; Jalen Reagor, WR; Ronnie Harrison Jr, LB; Bradley Pinion, P; Willie Gay Jr, LB; Zane Gonzalez, K; Lonnie Johnson Jr, S; Greg Dulcich, TE; Cameron Goode, LB;

OUT

Tua Tagovailoa, QB; Tyreek Hill, WR; Jaylen Waddle, WR; Alec Ingold, FB; Jason Sanders, K; Liam Eichenberg, OL; Nick Westbrook-Ikhine, WR; James Daniels, OL;

DRAFT

R1, P12	Kadyn Proctor, T
R1, P27	Chris Johnson, CB
R2, P43	Jacob Rodriguez, LB
R3, P75	Caleb Douglas, WR
R3, P87	Will Kacmarek, TE
R3, P94	Chris Bell, WR
R4, P130	Trey Moore, DE
R4, P138	Kyle Louis, LB
R5, P158	Michael Taaffe, S
R5, P177	Kevin Coleman Jr, WR
R5, P180	Seydou Traore, TE
R6, P200	D.J. Campbell, G
R7, P238	Max Llewellyn, DE

OFFENSE

Losing explosive players like Tua Tagovailoa, Tyreek Hill and Jaylen Waddle would damage any roster and, heading into 2026, Miami's offense is much leaner in both quality and depth. Malik Willis has rebuilt his reputation and arrives as a potentially pivotal free agent, but there isn't a lot of talent around him. De'Von Achane will be tasked with a lot of responsibility from the running back position, but he impressed last season as the Dolphins were able to become the 13th-best rushing team. Achane's return of 1,350 rushing yards also saved the Dolphins' offense further embarrassment.

The arrival of Bobby Slowik and Kevin Patullo on Jeff Hafley's staff will undoubtedly bring wrinkles from previous employers. Patullo, in particular, spent time with a Philadelphia team that perfected a particular play others sought to have banned, and could now look to capitalise on the sizeable O-line in Miami — where the average weight tops 320lbs — to use Willis in 'tush push' situations. Speaking of the O-line, Aaron Brewer is an upper-tier center, but his contract situation hung around like a bad smell. Miami's offense won't be outstanding in 2026 but, if it can be functional, that will be half the battle ahead of the 2027 draft.

KEY STAT

De'Von Achane registered 56 first downs through rushes during the 2025 season and made the Pro Bowl.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6.	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	AT	VS	AT	VS	BYE	AT	VS	VS

CEILING: *WINNING SEASON*

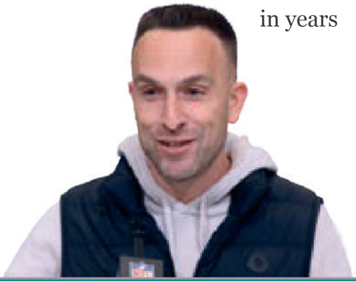
DEFENSE

Miami's defense will be led by Zach Sieler at defensive tackle and Jordyn Brooks at linebacker and, hands down, they are the best two players the Dolphins have on the defensive side of the ball. Brooks is still looking for a new contract, and a trade can't be ruled out but, at the time of writing, he is still in place. After that, there is a drop in quality. Joshua Uche has arrived on a one-year deal to help off the edge. JuJu Brents leads the secondary from the cornerback position, and you can expect him to take his game to the next level in 2026. Hopes are high for first-round pick Chris Johnson, who will play opposite Brents as the Dolphins look to rebuild a dominant secondary.

Last season was difficult for the Dolphins on defense, being ranked near the bottom of the league against both the pass and the run, but recruitment has been focused on this area of the team. Jeff Hafley will incorporate a disciplined mindset that contrasts with the Mike McDaniel era, and you can expect more interceptions and forced fumbles in 2026. Miami won't be loose on defense any longer as they shift towards hard-nosed play and effective run-stopping.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

2008	25	3
The last time the Dolphins won the AFC East	Longest playoff victory drought in the NFL in years	Seasons without an INT for Malik Willis



GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

Miami will need to adjust to a totally contrasting style of football under Jeff Hafley, but there are some strong pieces for the future. Getting contracts for Aaron Brewer and Jordyn Brooks is vitally important, as is setting the tone for 2027 and beyond. Discipline will be at the forefront in Miami.

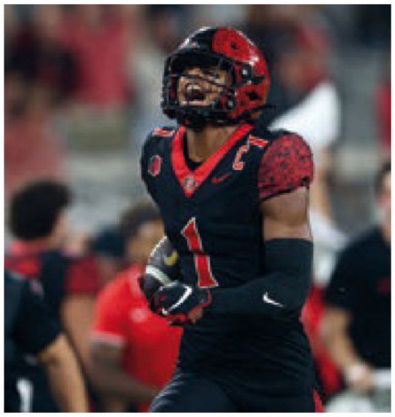
STAR MAN

AARON BREWER

C

Brewer is the anchor of Miami's offense. He is a great center and Malik Willis will need to lean on him a lot, given the lack of truly explosive weapons in the passing game. There aren't many stars left in Miami, but Brewer is certainly one of them... even at an unfashionable position.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



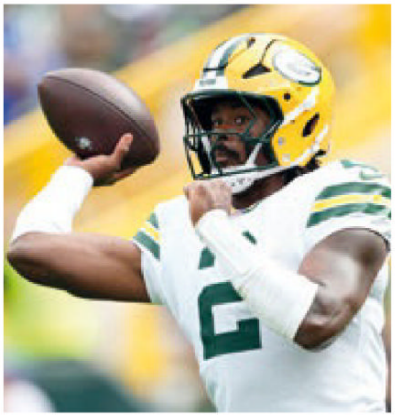
CHRIS JOHNSON

CB

Despite being a rookie, Johnson fits the scheme in Miami and can be a lockdown corner. He can perform on the outside or in the slot, and his body movements are impressively fluid. Quarterbacks were petrified of his coverage in college and he can add interceptions to what will be a strict Miami defense.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥🔥🔥



MALIK WILLIS

Willis is a new signing in Miami, and only appears on the Heat Index due to the fact he is expected to lead a group thin on quality. His performances as a back-up in Green Bay have steadied his rep, and Miami are hanging their hopes on him. That alone is a tough spot.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT	VS	VS	AT

FLOOR: *< 3 WINS*

NEW YORK JETS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Woody & Christopher Johnson	Darren Mougey	Aaron Glenn	MetLife Stadium	3-14

VERDICT

Rebuilding — again. Year two of another reconstruction, more tough sledding, focus on drafting a QB in 2027.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★☆☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★☆☆☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

A talented defense with a lot of potential could quickly find its feet and drag the team forward with them. They have acquired a real leader in T'Vondre Sweat, who will help against the run, even if takeaways remain an issue. Regardless of QB, Garrett Wilson has the potential to finally make a leap into the truly elite category.

THE CASE AGAINST

New York has a roster with too many holes. There isn't enough quality, and there isn't necessarily the inspired coaching in place to get those players to over-perform. The lack of an excellent quarterback will continue to limit this team's potential — but that might be just the ticket looking at the 2027 draft class.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

T'Vondre Sweat, NT; Joseph Ossai, DE; Minkah Fitzpatrick, S; Nahshon Wright, CB; Demario Davis, LB; Kene Nwangwu, RB; Tim Patrick, WR; Chukwuma Okorafor, T; Dane Belton, S; Andre Cisco, DB; Kingsley Enagbare, DE; Dylan Parham, G; Cade York, K; Jason Sanders, K; Younghoe Koo, K; Bailey Zappe, QB

OUT

Justin Fields, QB; Jermaine Johnson II, DE; Irvin Charles, WR; Christopher Smith, DB; Younghoe Koo, K; Lenny Krieg, K;

DRAFT

R1, P2	David Bailey, EDGE
R1, P16	Kenyon Sadiq, TE
R1, P30	Omar Cooper Jr, WR
R2, P50	D'Angelo Ponds, CB
R4, P103	Darrell Jackson Jr, DT
R4, P110	Cade Klubnik, QB
R6, P188	Anez Cooper, G
R7, P228	V.J. Payne, S

OFFENSE

Optimism isn't exactly rife within the Jets camp ahead of the 2026 season but, offensively, they have some positives. Garrett Wilson can be a truly elite playmaker, but he will need some help long-term. Rookie pairing Kenyon Sadiq and Omar Cooper Jr. both have high ceilings, even if they're not quite ready to produce now. Encouraging signs of a connection between Wilson and Geno Smith in the off-season could give fans a little hope, but the season will be a struggle. Smith will need to be much better than his first spell in the Big Apple, but he can't be worse than a 2025 offense which averaged less than one passing touchdown per game.

Re-signing RB Breece Hall to a long-term deal was something of a coup for NYJ and gives them two elite playmakers. However, New York's major strength will come on the O-line. Armand Membou and Olu Fashanu were much-improved in the second half of 2025 and are primed to go to the next level. There is hope that both players can be Pro Bowlers in the not-too-distant future, and prepping them now will be crucial if and when the Jets get their long-term quarterback solution in 2027.

KEY STAT

Breece Hall entered the offseason on a non-exclusive franchise tag, before signing a three-year, $45.75m extension to become the third-highest paid RB in the league.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS	VS	AT

CEILING: *WINNING SEASON*

DEFENSE

Building a solid defensive base is key for the future in New York, and any results it brings in 2026 will surely be seen as a bonus. As improved as we expect the Jets' defense to be, they can't be on the field as much as they were last season. Averaging 63.5 plays per game, there was too much pressure on the unit and it isn't sustainable.

David Bailey's arrival as the second-overall pick in the 2026 NFL Draft was an exciting move. The Texas Tech product was the consensus best pass rusher in the class, and the Jets needed serious help in that department, but more eyes will be focused on the secondary after the team ended the 2025 season without a single interception, becoming the first team ever to suffer that ignominy. Minkah Fitzpatrick has been signed to rectify that situation, just as T'Vondre Sweat has to help stop the run, another huge problem for the Jets last season. Allowing 139.5 rushing yards per game was the fourth-worst in the NFL and Gang Green will be banking on Sweat's potential to become the most dominant nose tackle in the league to change that.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

0.2	1967	18.5
Jets' per game takeaway average in 2025	Last season that a Jets QB (Joe Namath) threw for 4,000+ yards	Sacks for team-leader Will McDonald across 2024-25 seasons

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

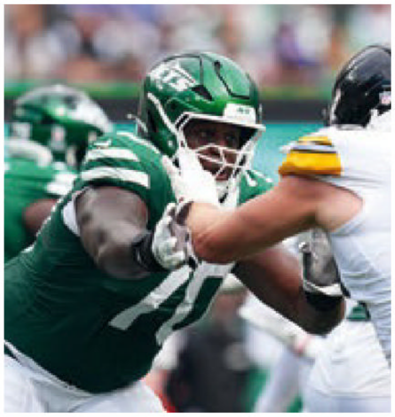
It's all about looking to the future for the Jets in 2026. Strong roster moves have been made to immediately bolster the defense, whilst the building of an electric offense has already begun. If 2026 will be a slog, it's mainly about player development and patience — although the fans have heard that before.

STAR MAN

GARRETT WILSON
WR

Wilson has the potential to be an elite WR1, but needs to find consistency. Incredible speed and smooth routes only work if the quarterback can find him, and Geno Smith's signing is intended to boost Wilson's production. Before getting injured last season, Wilson was on course for a fourth consecutive 1,000-yard campaign, with 395 receiving yards from just 36 receptions.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



ARMAND MEMBOU
OL

Membou was a highly regarded rookie last year, but even he would admit it took him some time to get going. In the second half of the season, however, he found his rhythm and improved, and could be a true star lineman in 2026. Hopes are high for Membou if he can stay healthy, and a Pro Bowl appearance in the near future isn't an impossibility.

HEAT INDEX

AARON GLENN
HC

Glenn's first year as head coach was disappointing, and the former fan favourite on the field heads into his second campaign needing to improve — but without the roster to necessarily do so. It looks like it will be a bumpy ride for Glenn, especially as teams tend to want a new coach when they eventually secure their QB of the future.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13.	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	AT	AT	AT BYE	VS	AT	VS	VS	AT

FLOOR: *#1 PICK IN THE 2027 NFL DRAFT*

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Robert Kraft	Eliot Wolf	Mike Vrabel	Gillette Stadium	14-3 (Lost in Super Bowl)

VERDICT

Elite, defense-heavy coaching is strength; QB Drake Maye can be MVP-candidate, but needs firepower for Super Bowl return.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★★
OFFENSE:	★★★★☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★★
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★☆☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

Drake Maye is a stud. He can carry any team on his back, and a partnership with A.J. Brown is exciting. Mike Vrabel knows how to coach defense and boasts an exceptional roster on that side of the ball. They've been to the Super Bowl before; this team has the know-how.

THE CASE AGAINST

Aside from the addition of Brown, the offense still lacks serious playmakers. Stefon Diggs has only been partly replaced, and that could haunt the Pats further down the line. A lot of responsibility will fall on TreVeyon Henderson's shoulders in the rushing game, and he's still young.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

A.J. Brown, WR; Kevin Byard, S; Dre'Mont Jones, LB; Alijah Vera-Tucker, G; Romeo Doubs, WR; Reggie Gilliam, FB; James Hudson III, T; Kindle Vildor, CB; Mike Brown, S; Jesse Luketa, LB;

OUT

Stefon Diggs, WR; Anfernee Jennings, LB; Garrett Bradbury, C; Elijah Mitchell, RB; Marte Mapu, LB; Joshua Dobbs, QB; Jahlani Tavai, LB; Antonio Gibson, RB;

DRAFT

R1, P28	Caleb Lomu, T
R2, P55	Gabe Jacas, DE
R3, P95	Eli Raridon, TE
R5, P171	Karon Prunty, CB
R6, P196	Dametrious Crownover, T
R6, P212	Namdi Obiazor, LB
R7, P234	Behren Morton, QB
R7, P245	Jam Miller, RB
R7, P247	Quintayvious Hutchins, DE

OFFENSE

Drake Maye led an efficient offense in 2025, and he is on course to be in the MVP conversation yet again. His passing is productive and takes advantage of a simpler offensive scheme than we've seen around the NFL. Despite the Super Bowl aberration, blocking will be strong once more, but it's the skill positions that could be the team's downfall. Losing Stefon Diggs is a blow, but the blockbuster trade for A.J. Brown will go some way to filling that hole. How quickly he can build a partnership with Maye could dictate just how potent this 2026 offense will be. Hunter Henry, meanwhile, is another year older and unlikely to produce at such a high level as his 2025 career year.

A drop in form from Maye, however, would be catastrophic. New England's offensive line was amongst the best in football last season, but the question marks over their health are a concern. If they can stay healthy, then the Pats will be in much better shape. At their optimum, they allowed just 2.1 sacks per game in 2025, seventh best in the entire league. TreVeyon Henderson's rookie season was eye-catching, and don't be surprised if the Patriots rush more in 2026.

KEY STAT

New England had the second-lowest combined third and fourth-down completions allowed percentage in the NFL with 71.8 out of 200.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 9	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 22	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	VS	AT	AT	VS

DEFENSE

Dre'Mont Jones' arrival boosts the pass-rushing quality on the Patriots roster, with HC Mike Vrabel already commanding an elite defense last year. Anfernee Jennings departed along with K'Lavon Chaisson, however, whilst Christian Gonzalez is currently engaged in a holdout. Gonzalez was a star in the secondary last year, and that situation needs sorting — and quickly. Kevin Byard adds veteran know-how at safety, and Vrabel has worked with him before in Tennessee.

Harold Landry III led the team in sacks last year with 8.5, and he will once again be pivotal in the Pats pressuring the passer. Gabe Jacas could be a productive rookie in 2026. He excels at getting to the QB, which is where New England can still improve. In his final collegiate season, Jacas registered 11 sacks. He improved each year with Illinois and will look to do the same in the pros. Having registered a return of just 0.6 interceptions per game last year, the Patriots will hope to be better at taking the ball away, and this could lead to a quick promotion to the starting line-up for rookie Karon Prunty. Don't be fooled by his lowly return of two college interceptions.

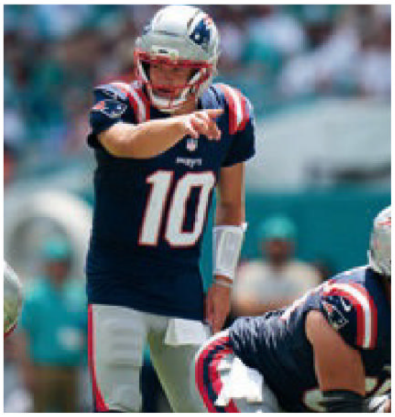
NUMBERS TO KNOW

72	2021	.824
Drake Maye's 2025 completion percentage topped Tom Brady's Pats best	The last season where A.J. Brown didn't record 1,000 receiving yards	Mike Vrabel's win percentage best for New England since 2016 Bill Belichick

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

Much of the pressure heading into the new season comes from Mike Vrabel's off-field antics, but there is also the question of whether, despite their strong roster, the Patriots over-performed in 2025 and might slide naturally into a more realistic position in 2026.

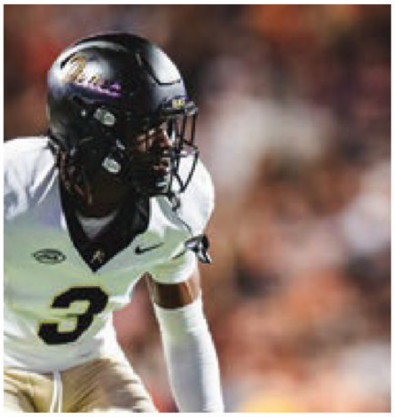
STAR MAN



DRAKE MAYE
QB

An outstanding second year in the NFL has set Maye up to claim his position as a cornerstone of the league over the next decade. Year three will see him lead from the front once more and he could again be in the MVP conversation by January — especially if he can form a solid connection with A.J. Brown.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



KARON PRUNTY
CB

Prunty was a real sleeper in the 2026 NFL Draft, lasting until the 171st selection, but the Patriots got an absolute steal. Nomadic in college, the Wake Forest prospect is expected to start as a depth corner, but will impress with his effort and ball-hawk instincts, both of which were on full display in training camp.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥

MIKE VRABEL
HC

Vrabel is on the hot seat purely because of the romantic scandal which overshadowed his offseason preparation, and we don't yet know how he will bounce back from that. However, his work in Tennessee was stellar and his debut season with New England repositioned the franchise as a contender, so you can see why the fans are forgiving.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11.	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 10	WK 15. Dec 21	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	AT BYE	AT	VS	VS	AT KC	AT JETS	VS	VS

CEILING: *CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP*

FLOOR: *WILDCARD LOSS*

VIEW TO A KILL

Three years without a playoff appearance have forced Cincinnati into unfamiliar territory. With Joe Burrow’s patience tested and their Super Bowl window narrowing, the Bengals have finally pushed their chips to the middle of the table.

LEE CAMPBELL

CONTRIBUTOR
X @campbell75L

The Cincinnati Bengals haven’t made the NFL playoffs since the 2022 season. A new defensive end has arrived with a mandate to change that. A home-grown safety is back in Ohio. And the franchise just traded a first-round pick—their most precious commodity—for a 28-year-old defensive tackle. The pressure is amplified. Everything matters. The time is now for Cincinnati.

Super Bowl-winning whirlwind edge Boye Mafe, who joined the Bengals from Seattle in free agency, delivers a disarming answer when asked about that pressure.

“You ready for this? This is the mic drop right here,” Mafe told *Gridiron*, his voice steady and measured. “All pressure is, is fear — and fear is ‘False Evidence Appearing Real’. So pressure is not a real thing. All that is nothing. It’s more about how you handle it. I like to live in the absolutes and things that I can control. Pressures are uncontrollable things that have nothing to do with me.”

Asked why he chose Cincinnati when he surely could have had his pick of cities after his role in that Seahawks Super Bowl success, Mafe is equally succinct.

“During our conversations with [head coach] Zac [Taylor], with all the coaches, and seeing the vision that they want to create here, I wanted to be a part of that,” he explained. “I love being a part of building something. They’ve been to the Super Bowl before, they’ve been to where I just came from, and I want to go back. With the energy and hunger for that, that’s something that I want to be around.”

It’s a philosophy that cuts through the noise surrounding Cincinnati’s offseason like nothing else. In an organisation that spent three seasons paralysed by expectations it couldn’t meet, Mafe arrives preaching liberation from the tyranny of what might be.

The Bengals are *expected* to compete for a Super Bowl. Their quarterback has hinted at frustration. Their draft picks are limited because the front office finally opened its wallet. The only path forward leads directly through success.

Bengals beat writer for *The Athletic* and host of *The Growler Podcast*, Paul Dehner Jr was hugely positive about the Mafe signing when he spoke with *Gridiron*.

“I love Boye Mafe,” he enthused. “His ceiling is so high and he’s so explosive. He’s still ascending. I just like everything about his profile and the type of player he is. I think he’ll just cause chaos. Seattle had all those guys. They had waves, and Mafe was a big part of it. He’ll be more front and centre here [in Cincinnati], but he’s still going to be part of those rotations. He was really effective at that in Seattle, and that’s the type of stuff that won them a championship.”

> “
> **YOU READY FOR THIS? THIS IS THE MIC DROP RIGHT HERE**

Mafe, fresh from that Super Bowl victory with the Seahawks, seems almost amused by the weight everyone else carries.

"I feel, with who we got in this room, we make the decision to do it, to go out there and be who we want to be," he explains. "The sky's the limit. It's up to us. We have to make a decision, and that decision is on us."

It's not bravado. It's clarity that arrives at a moment when the Cincinnati Bengals, after years of incremental moves and philosophical hand-wringing, have finally decided that clarity is what they need. The moment happened on a day most of America wasn't paying attention. Duke Tobin, the *de facto* general manager who built the Bengals around Joe Burrow and Ja'Marr Chase but never quite found the pieces to complete the puzzle, sat down with the media — something he rarely does. He didn't announce anything revolutionary. He simply acknowledged what everyone in Cincinnati had begun to realise: this team's approach needed to change.

"I've never not been all in," Tobin said during the winter. It was a defensive statement, one that suggested he'd already been giving everything, making a few eyes roll around the media room as well as among the fanbase. But Dehner Jr saw something different in the subtext and what followed in the weeks after that underwhelming press conference.

"This is different," Dehner confirms now, analysing the philosophical shift. "I was talking to their assistant general manager, Steven Radicevic, and he has never been in this situation now with the salary cap, and he's been here for a decade-and-a-half. They've never pushed money out like this. They've never been up against it like this."

* * *

ALL IN: GM Duke Tobin's change of tack (above) led to the trade for Dexter Lawrence (below).

> "THE SKY'S THE LIMIT. IT'S UP TO US

The biggest moment arrived when the Bengals traded their tenth overall pick — the most valuable currency in the NFL — for Dexter Lawrence. The defensive tackle, 28-years-old and coming off an underperforming season with the New York Giants, represents something radical with the Bengals actually spending to win now, not sometime in the future. Joe Danneman, sports director at TV channel *Fox19 Cincinnati*, was genuinely taken aback.

"I was stunned. I was shocked," he admits. "And then I immediately said to myself, get ready because this is potentially a Super Bowl run. It's that kind of roster."

And as Dehner Jr explains, sometimes the intangibles are just as important as the tangibles.

"Organisationally, you can feel real juice in terms of the difference it made in the locker room and in the attitude of people," he clarified. "That move was really invigorating."

The Carson Palmer trade from 2013 gets mentioned whenever people talk about watershed moments in Bengals history. But that was different, as Palmer wanted out and Cincinnati didn't get much in return. The Dexter Lawrence trade is something else entirely. It's the organisation saying 'we have a once-in-a-generation quarterback, a top-three receiver, and we're willing to sacrifice future assets to compete right now'.

It's a message that needed to be sent, especially to one person. Joe Burrow's patience was wearing thin. By the end of the 2025 season, it had become clear to anyone paying attention that the quarterback wasn't going to accept a fourth consecutive playoff absence. He'd been quietly, then not so quietly, expressing frustration. The Bengals had surrounded him with all-world offensive talent — Chase, Tee Higgins — but the defense remained a sieve. In 2025, it wasn't just bad, it was so bad it broke records.

"I think Joe's pressure was definitely part of the reason why they had to be aggressive," Danneman says bluntly. "He understood what was at stake. If things went badly, if they didn't have a good offseason and they didn't make the playoffs in 2026, I'm not sure Joe Burrow would play in Cincinnati in 2027."

It wasn’t a threat. It was mathematics. Burrow is in the prime of his career — a five- or six-year window where he, Chase and Higgins can realistically compete for championships. The Bengals have already squandered a few of those years. Another would constitute organisational malpractice.

Dan Hoard, the Bengals radio play-by-play announcer, sees it differently however. To him, the offseason moves represent something deeper than capitulation to pressure. They represented clarity of purpose.

“I legitimately think that the Bengals *are* a Super Bowl contender,” Hoard says. “And I’m not saying that because I’ve been the Bengals radio announcer for 15 years and the team pays my salary. I really do think that this is one of the best rosters in the NFL.”

It’s a roster that starts with a quarterback who understands exactly what winning a championship in Cincinnati would mean. Burrow isn’t chasing glory. He’s chasing the kind of history that rewrites a franchise’s narrative.

“If he wins a Super Bowl here, he does something that a lot of people nationally thought couldn’t be done, right?” Danneman explains. “And, if you do that, you become Luke Skywalker. It’s like the ultimate Jedi status if you can take the Cincinnati Bengals to the Super Bowl *and win*.”

Burrow understands that. The evidence suggests he understood it even in moments of frustration. Now, with the roster finally reflecting organisational ambition, he has what he needed: proof that the franchise isn’t content to be merely competitive. It wants to be dominant.

* * *

For years, the Bengals’ defensive identity was a question mark. The team had invested in the defense — first-round picks, premium free agent signings, expensive contracts — yet the unit remained stubbornly mediocre to poor. Secondary issues were masked over by Burrow putting up 30+ points, but the run defense couldn’t establish identity and a pass rush that couldn’t generate consistent pressure was compounded in the offseason by Trey Hendrickson exiting for division rivals Baltimore.

If anything, the 2025 season was the breaking point. The defense was *historically* bad. Players weren’t making plays and leadership was absent. The offense carried them week after week and, eventually, that wasn’t enough. Dexter Lawrence changes that equation, but not just because of his individual talent, which is considerable. He changes it because he represents something the Bengals haven’t had in years; what Dehner Jr refers to as ‘an alpha voice on defense’.

“You just notice him as being *that* guy,” he continues. “He’s going to push you. He’s going to give these guys a lot. They needed it so bad. They were rudderless last year on defense. This is the first time they’ve taken a real big swing.”

It feels that, if you don’t make these kinds of moves on a consistent basis, franchises get left in the rearview mirror.

“That’s just the way the league is going now,” Dehner Jr explains. “You look at the teams that are consistently playing at the end [of the season], the teams that have won. That’s what the league is. It’s the teams that aren’t afraid to spend big in free agency and go after guys and make a big trade. Seattle did that. The Eagles have done that.“

“What has Dexter brought to the team so far since he’s been here?” Boye Mafe was asked by *Gridiron*. “A lot of people are saying about his size and who he is as a player, but I think he’s brought calmness,” was the DE’s considered reply. “A lot of people don’t realise that. When you have a person like that next to you, it makes your job easier, it makes your world easier. So he brings a lot of calm energy and a lot of ‘we’re okay, we can do this’.”

That’s the kind of impact that doesn’t show up on the stat sheet, but Dan Hoard sees it clearly.

“I think we’ll see a re-energised and healthy Dexter Lawrence,” he notes. “His friendship with [Bengals veteran] B.J. Hill is part of that. It’s put him in a great state of mind going into this season. He’s energised more than he’s been on a Giants team that wasn’t winning a lot of games during his tenure there.”

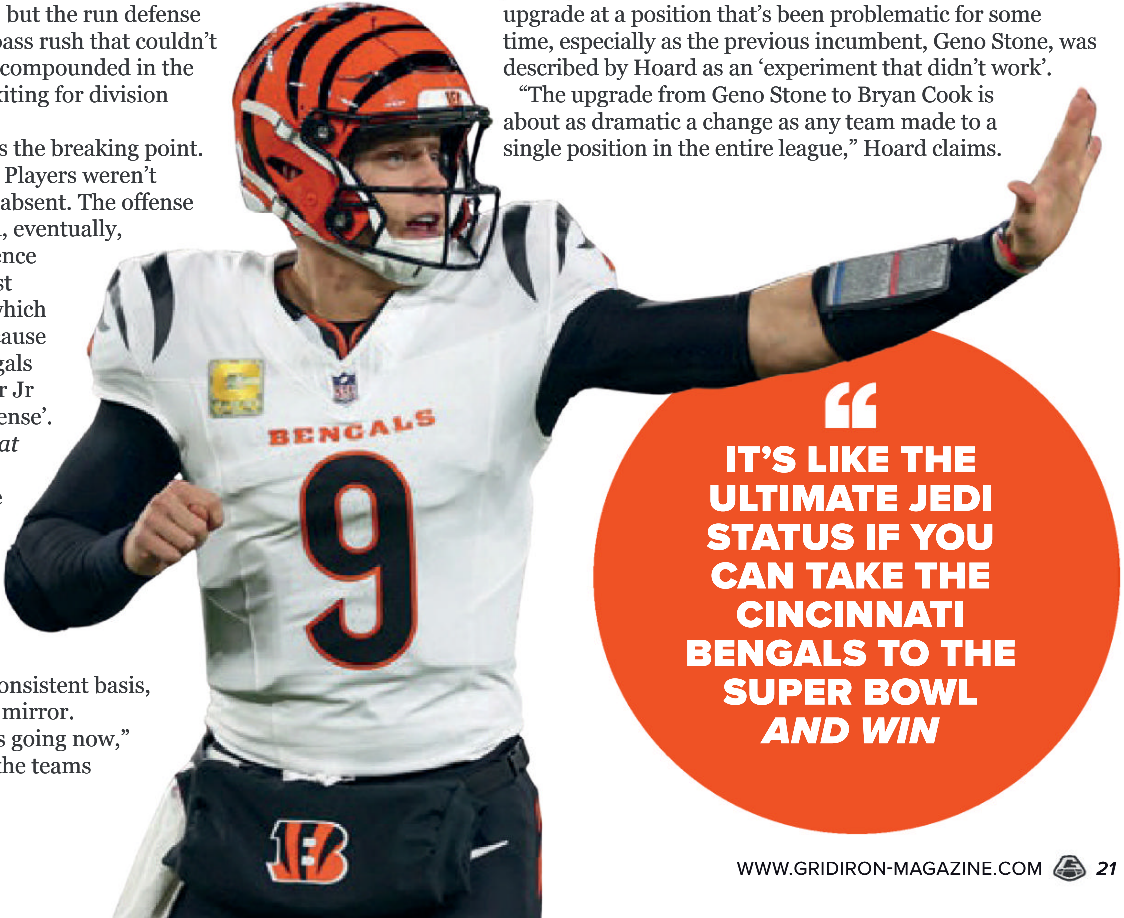
Lawrence also feels the weight of expectation, not as a burden, but as motivation. The Bengals gave up their tenth overall pick, and he’s signed long-term. The message, clearly, is to prove this wasn’t a mistake.

“Dexter doesn’t think lightly of that and realises that the Bengals went out on a limb and did something that teams rarely do: give up draft capital that’s that high in order to get a veteran player,” Hoard explains. “He would like to prove to the entire NFL that the Bengals made a wise move in trading the 10th pick to get him at age 28.”

* * *

Lawrence isn’t the only acquisition that will define this defense. Safety Bryan Cook, who the Bengals brought in from Kansas City, represents a dramatic upgrade at a position that’s been problematic for some time, especially as the previous incumbent, Geno Stone, was described by Hoard as an ‘experiment that didn’t work’.

“The upgrade from Geno Stone to Bryan Cook is about as dramatic a change as any team made to a single position in the entire league,” Hoard claims.



HEAR ME ROAR: QB Joe Burrow (below) has made no secret of his dissatisfaction with the Bengals’ ambition.

> **“ IT’S LIKE THE ULTIMATE JEDI STATUS IF YOU CAN TAKE THE CINCINNATI BENGALS TO THE SUPER BOWL *AND WIN***

"Stone, unfortunately for the Bengals, just didn't work out very well, missed a lot of tackles, didn't have nearly as many interceptions as he had while he was in Baltimore. Bryan Cook gives them something they haven't had in a while. In my opinion, he is somebody who puts the fear of God into wide receivers that run over the middle of the field."

Cook brings intensity. He brings leadership. He brings the same championship experience that Mafe carries. These aren't just good players, but players with a winning pedigree who understand what it takes.

Cook is from the Mount Healthy area of greater Cincinnati, only a few minutes drive from Paycor Stadium. "What would it mean to bring a championship to Cincinnati?" *Gridiron* asked him after a May training session. His answer is earnest and deeply personal.

"It would mean a lot of things," he admitted. "One, a sense of fulfillment that you couldn't even imagine, let alone making it to the NFL and being able to experience that mountain top. Then, to have the opportunity to come back here and bring that Lombardi Trophy to my home town, I mean, what more could you ask for out of this profession?"

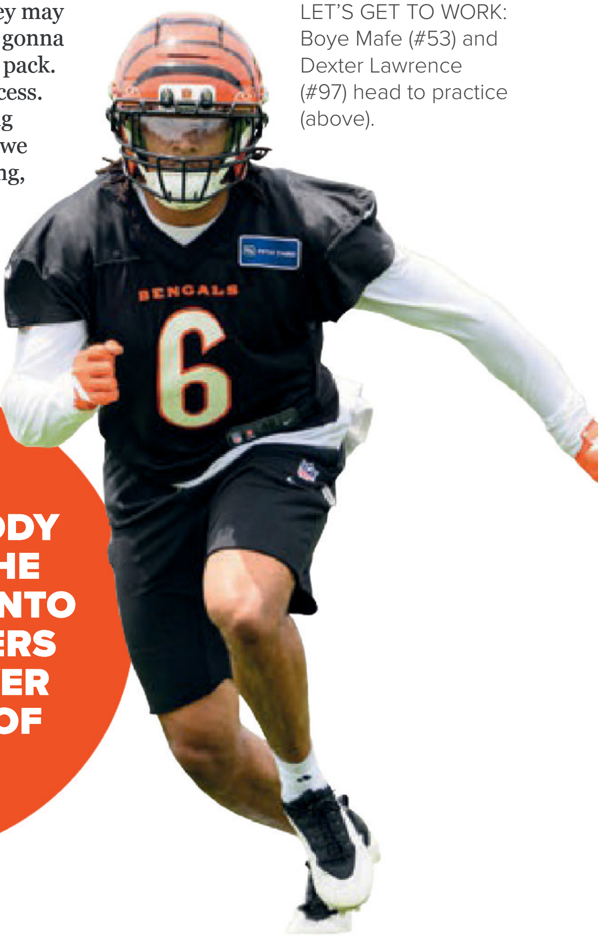
Cook grew up idolizing Bengals receivers Chad Johnson and T.J. Houshmandzadeh. He *wanted* to play for Cincinnati. Now he's here, with a title opportunity, mentoring younger players and constructing the daily routine that championships require.

"Just building daily habits, stacking your days, paying attention to detail," he explained. "You gotta be able to be okay with the mundane, the day-to-day grind, the days when you feel like you're not really doing too much. Those days may seem boring, they may seem tedious, but those days are gonna separate you from the rest of the pack.

"Then, it's just trusting the process. It's gonna be a long season, a long road ahead of us. But, as long as we stay together and we keep working, things will work out for us."

* * *

LET'S GET TO WORK: Boye Mafe (#53) and Dexter Lawrence (#97) head to practice (above).



"HE IS SOMEBODY WHO PUTS THE FEAR OF GOD INTO WIDE RECEIVERS THAT RUN OVER THE MIDDLE OF THE FIELD

If the Bengals are going to succeed, it flows through the defensive line. Lawrence, Mafe, free agent recruit Jonathan Allen from the Minnesota Vikings and the intriguing addition of second-round pick Cashius Howell create a depth chart that Joe Danneman describes as potentially transformational.

"Edge is the most important part of a defense," Danneman argues. "You've got to get a quarterback. What's the second most important position? Well, a wide receiver because it's such a passing need. What's the third most important position? I would say edge because he affects the quarterback for your defense."

The Bengals have been chasing an elite edge rusher for years. Trey Hendrickson was their answer, but injuries limited his availability, especially last season when many fans were of the opinion that he just downed tools midway through the season with a lingering core muscle issue. They've tried with first-round picks Myles Murphy and Shemar Stewart, but haven't found the dominant presence they need. Now they're taking multiple swings at it, hoping one of them ascends.

Howell represents a departure from the Bengals' usual approach. He's smaller, quicker, bendier and definitely not the prototypical 270-pound edge rusher Cincinnati has traditionally targeted. Dehner Jr sees the Texas A&M product as a potential game-changer, specifically as a finisher.

> "YOU GOTTA BE ABLE TO BE OKAY WITH THE MUNDANE, THE DAY-TO-DAY GRIND

"I just like him as the closer. They missed that when Trey was hurt last year," the beat writer explains. "To be able to have him come in when the other team is passing and have him come from that wide edge with his speed. You've got some of the bigger guys inside, and I just think he is going to be a really dangerous weapon. I could see him finishing off a couple of wins for them this year."

"Cashius Howell gives them something they don't have — or haven't had in a long time," Hoard adds. "A super twitchy, fast pass rusher, as opposed to kind of the prototypical guy that met the parameters of what the Bengals looked for in a defensive end."

The defensive line is the engine. If it works, if Lawrence brings back the version of himself from 2023, if Mafe causes chaos on the edge, if the young players develop, then everything else becomes easier. The secondary doesn't have to be elite. The linebackers don't have to be perfect. But the defensive line *has* to disrupt.

* * *

The season ahead still has obvious concerns. "They might have the best top-to-bottom roster in the AFC," admits Danneman. "After that, is when I start to worry — and, inevitably, injuries will happen. The offensive line depth is scary. The linebacker room is scary. If [Demetrious] Knight and [Barrett] Carter [at linebacker] don't take a huge step forward, they have no other options in that room of guys."

One of the most underrated aspects of the Bengals' situation is the chaos surrounding the rest of the AFC North. Baltimore, Cleveland and Pittsburgh all have new coaching teams. The transition period is real.

SAFETY MATCH: Former Chiefs safety Bryan Cook (left) is an upgrade at the position for Cincinnati', while rookie Cashius Howell (above) will bring pressure from the edge.'

"You have an entire division that has had an overhaul," Dehner Jr notes. "It's not realistic to think that all these coaches are going to show up and just have no bumps in the road or not be figuring stuff out, learning who the guys are. It's never clean that way."

Cincinnati, meanwhile, has stability. Zac Taylor returns as head coach. The offensive line is intact. Burrow, Chase, and Higgins are all healthy and back. The defensive overhaul happened in the offseason, not during training camp.

"You'd have to say the most stable roster, most stable coaching staff, and maybe the best starting roster is in Cincinnati," Danneman assesses. "That doesn't guarantee the Bengals win anything, but this looks to me, on paper, an 11-win team, maybe as high as 12 if the schedule isn't as difficult as it was last year."

It's a significant advantage. In a division in transition, the team with continuity and clarity has a massive edge. Which brings us to the elephant in the room: Zac Taylor's own job security. Three consecutive playoff misses. An organisation that finally went 'all in'. A quarterback who's made his frustration known. Everything converges on the head

RING FINGERS?: Wide receivers Tee Higgins and Ja'Marr Chase (above) will play a big part in any Cincy success...

coach. Taylor has perhaps been given more patience than most coaches would receive elsewhere, largely because he took Cincinnati to the Super Bowl in just his third season.

"I mean, it just doesn't happen that often in the NFL, especially if you haven't made the playoffs for three consecutive years," Danneman notes. "We know things are different here, right? The front office is more loyal than other front offices and ownership groups."

But loyalty doesn't mean infinite patience.

"I'm not surprised that Zac Taylor is getting a longer leash, but I think we all understand that this year is a make-or-break year for this coaching staff," Danneman continues. "I don't know if we can fully define what make-or-break is. Is it getting back to the playoffs? Is it getting to the playoffs and winning games? Or is it you have to get to the Super Bowl?"

Dehner Jr. offers his perspective, stating that 'the onus has now fallen back on Zac Taylor and Joe Burrow'.

"The personnel department gave them the pieces, they spent the money, they made the big move and they're all in, so it's on them to deliver now," he emphasises.

If things go wrong — if the defense doesn't gel, if injuries strike, if the chemistry isn't there — there will be accountability. But it won't be because the roster was left wanting. For the first time in years, the Bengals can't blame the front office.

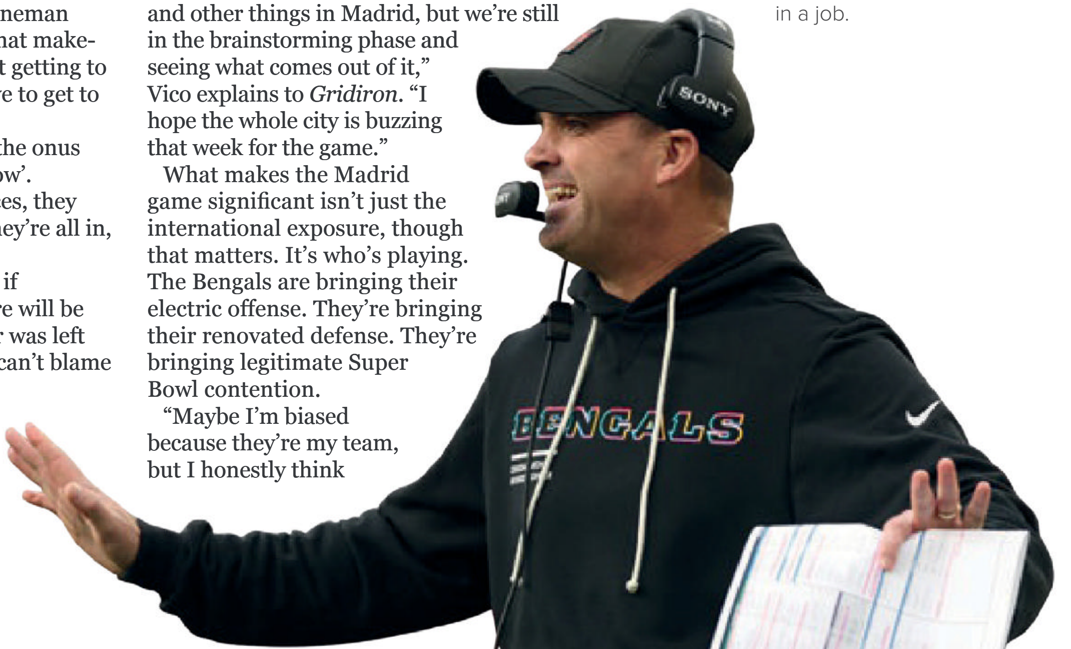
* * *

In the midst of all this internal pressure and ambition sits a fascinating subplot: the Bengals are heading to Madrid for an international game. The overseas fan base that's developed, particularly in Europe, represents something the franchise rarely experienced before Burrow and Chase arrived. Madrid native Jesús Jimenez Vico represents some of that base. A Bengals fan for over a decade, he is a prominent member of *La Jungla Hispana* [The Spanish Jungle] and has watched the team build an unlikely European following.

"We've got a few ideas for organising meet-ups and other things in Madrid, but we're still in the brainstorming phase and seeing what comes out of it," Vico explains to *Gridiron*. "I hope the whole city is buzzing that week for the game."

What makes the Madrid game significant isn't just the international exposure, though that matters. It's who's playing. The Bengals are bringing their electric offense. They're bringing their renovated defense. They're bringing legitimate Super Bowl contention.

"Maybe I'm biased because they're my team, but I honestly think



...which might be needed to keep Zac Taylor (below) in a job.

that, out of the nine international games, the best one will be the one we'll experience in November at the Santiago Bernabéu," Vico says. "We have the most exciting offense in the NFL; the only issue was that our defense was one of the worst. To help grow the sport in Spain, I honestly don't think there could be a better game, or a better team, than the Bengals."

Hoard, who will be broadcasting from Madrid, captures what this moment means for the franchise internationally.

"I just remember London [in 2016 and 2019] and being outside the stadium before the game and literally seeing the jersey of every NFL team," he recalls. "It was just people that love American football flocking to Wembley Stadium to see those two games — and I'm sure it's going to be the same in Madrid.

"And having the opportunity to go to a pub... The NFL will pick one or the Bengals will pick one, seeing people that want to talk about how much they love the team and how they became Bengals fans. I'm really looking forward to that."

Both Cook and Mafe have played abroad before joining the Bengals. Cook played in Frankfurt and Mafe was part of the Seahawks team that visited Munich. They were equally complimentary and enthused.

"Loved it. It was amazing," Mafe tells *Gridiron*. "I'm excited to see what Spain has to offer."

"It was nuts," exclaims Cook, who even managed to score a touchdown in Frankfurt after running back a fumble against Miami. "I haven't experienced a stadium like that, where there was no true home team. It was a neutral site but, on that touchdown score, it was a memory I'll never forget."

Even internationally, the message is consistent: this team finally has a complete roster. When analysts debate whether the Dexter Lawrence trade is the biggest in Bengals history, they're really asking a deeper question: has Cincinnati ever truly committed to winning in the short term at the expense of the future?

The answer has traditionally been no. The Bengals have valued draft picks, valued sustainability, valued the ability to always field a competitive team year after year. It's a philosophy that works if you're patient. But it fails if your window is narrowing.

"With them going for Dexter Lawrence, they arguably have the best player at three different positions now in the NFL: quarterback, wide receiver and D-tackle," Danneman projects. "I would still like to see them address some of the contracts they have that could be coming up, such as Chase Brown and D.J. Turner, but, for what they've done, pushing this thing towards the middle, understanding the assignment that Joe Burrow was upset and needed a roster that he could win with, the fact that they've done that, I give them an A grade."

Dehner Jr confirms the magnitude of Cincy's offseason.

"They've never made a splash like this," he insists. "I guess you'd have to go back to the idea of the Ki-Jana Carter trade [in 1995] but, even then, because of the way it worked out, you don't really count it. But they've never done anything like this. They've made big signings and had some big moves, but this was really monumental."

The philosophical shift is what matters. The Bengals are finally acknowledging that windows close, that quarterback talent doesn't guarantee championships and that, sometimes, you have to spend your chips and hope they pay off. Shemar Stewart is still incomplete and Myles Murphy needs to prove his first three seasons weren't predictive, but the young guys aren't being asked to spearhead this team. And that's the difference.

"They're not relying on this year's rookie class to save them, which they were last year," Dehner Jr notes. "And when you have that, you're in a much better position to take off quickly."

Bryan Cook builds on that, employing the language of winners, of teams that have been there before.

"I'm not telling the younger players to be perfect, as long as they're flying around," he says. "Don't hesitate, play fast and play physical — and be confident."

* * *

As the Bengals prepare for the season, one question dominates: Can they finally deliver? Boye Mafe's philosophy that pressure and fear is false evidence appearing real, feels fitting. Because the pressure isn't actually pressure; it's a realisation. The organisation knows what it needs to do. The players know what's expected. The fans know this is the moment.

"They're in a great place," Dehner Jr agrees, while recognising the sense of urgency for the organisation. "All you can ask for this time of year is to feel like you have a roster that can win the Super Bowl. I think they're on a short list of teams where you can see that path and it doesn't feel like a stretch. You haven't been able to say this in a few years."

The Bengals are no longer a curiosity. They're not a team waiting for the next big move. They're a complete roster, built around a generational quarterback, with players who've won championships and understand what it takes.

Three years without playoffs ends this season, or else the franchise enters a new era of enforced changes. But, with the roster they've assembled, with the clarity they've found, the Bengals have finally chosen to fight for it all. The question is no longer whether they can compete. It's whether they can finish.

> “ THEY'VE MADE BIG SIGNINGS AND HAD SOME BIG MOVES, BUT THIS WAS REALLY MONUMENTAL

For further info on X:
Bengals official - **@Bengals**
Bengals UK - **@WhoDey_UK**
La Jungla Hispana - **@jungla_es**
The Growler - **@GrowlerPodcast** & **@pauldehnerjr** [Paul Dehner Jr.]
Bengals Booth Podcast - **@Dan_Hoard** [Dan Hoard]
Fox19 Cincinnati - **@FOX19Joe** [Joe Danneman]

CINCINNATI BENGALS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Mike Brown	Duke Tobin	Zac Taylor	Paycor Stadium	6-11

VERDICT

Biggest discrepancy between best and worst; Joe Burrow comeback season avoids unthinkable fourth straight playoff absence.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★★
OFFENSE:	★★★★★
DEFENSE:	★★★★☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★☆☆
COACHING:	★★☆☆☆

THE CASE FOR

Joe Burrow's Bengals have been to a Super Bowl before, know what it takes, and have the talent to do it again. Ja'Marr Chase is one of the best receivers around, and improvements on the O-line could allow the offense to perform at a supremely high level. Defensive reinforcements should permit Burrow more time on the field.

THE CASE AGAINST

Zac Taylor hasn't done a good job as coach since he led the Bengals to the Super Bowl. Missing the playoffs for three successive years with the players he's had — even allowing for injuries — is becoming a major red flag. Alarm bells may be ringing in Cincinnati that Taylor may not actually be the coach to deliver success.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Dexter Lawrence II, DT; Boye Mafe, DE; Bryan Cook, S; Dalton Risner, G; Jonathan Allen, DT; Kyle Dugger, S; Joe Flacco, QB; Jalen Davis, CB; Ja'Sir Taylor, CB; Swayze Bozeman, LB; Josh Johnson, QB; Kendall Milton, RB, Kendric Pryor, WR

OUT

Trey Hendrickson, DE; Joseph Ossai, DE; Geno Stone, S; Noah Fant, TE; Cordell Volson, G; Cam Taylor-Britt, CB; Lucas Patrick, G; Cam Sample, DE; Jake Browning, QB; Marco Wilson, CB; Tycen Anderson, S; Brian Asamoah II, LB

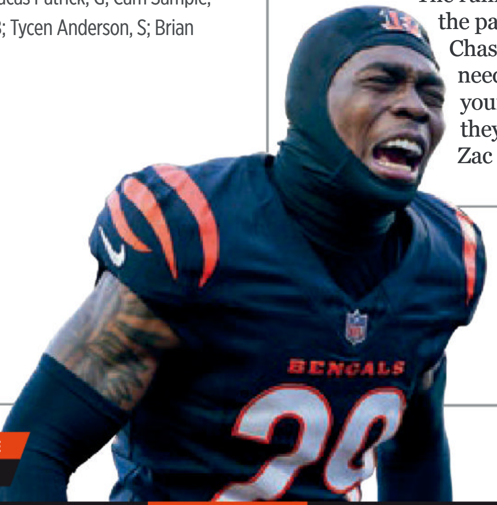
DRAFT

R2, P41	Cashius Howell, DE
R3, P72	Tacario Davis, CB
R4, P128	Connor Lew, C
R4, P140	Colbie Young, WR
R6, P189	Brian Parker II, C
R7, P221	Jack Endries, TE
R7, P226	Landon Robinson, DT

OFFENSE

When you have a quarterback as skilled as Joe Burrow, you are always in with a chance. Keeping him healthy has been a problem in Cincinnati, however, and the team's O-line has to be better at protecting him. Burrow's playing style will bring sacks, but his line needs to stop the avoidable ones. Ja'Marr Chase remains a blue-chip receiver and a perfect foil for Burrow. If they're healthy and together, the Bengals can be explosive on first down once again.

An off-season focus on big yardage plays will likely show through in performances from a deep receiving unit. Tee Higgins and Andrei Iosivas can do more as receiving options and will be expected to put up better numbers in 2026. The running game has been virtually non-existent in Cincinnati over the past few years, but the Bengals need to become more versatile. Chase Brown is their best running back, but the coaching staff needs to trust him more. Yes, Burrow and Chase are going to be your home run hitters, but you can't pass up good yards when they're available. Trade rumours regarding James Conner suggest Zac Taylor is serious about utilising the rush more next season.



KEY STAT

Cleveland's 492 points allowed in 2025 were the most the franchise has ever conceded since its inception.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6.	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	AT BYE	AT	VS	AT

DEFENSE

Improving the team's defense was the major aim in the offseason, and it can be argued that the Bengals have done just that, even with premium pass rusher Trey Hendrickson departing for division rival Baltimore. A blockbuster trade for ex-Giant Dexter Lawrence II, arguably the best defensive tackle in football, has gone a long way to boosting confidence in the team's defense, and adding Jonathan Allen, Boye Mafe and Bryan Cook in free agency has completely transformed what appeared to be an ailing unit.

Last season saw Cincy rank dead last in pass rush win rate, despite having Hendrickson on board, and that undermined everything the offense tried to do in possession. Lawrence now stuffs the middle, allowing Allen and Mafe to get to the QB. It's a smart plan which puts the best players in their best positions. Making the trade for Lawrence made it clear that the Bengals rate their roster highly and feel a championship is still within their grasp. Consistency on defense has to improve, but it's impossible to argue that the pieces aren't there for a serious run in 2026.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

8	72	2021
Number of games started by Joe Burrow in 2025.	Difference in rush attempts between Chase Brown (232) and Derrick Henry.	Last time Cincinnati wasn't a top seven team in pass attempts.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

This is going to be the year Cincy gets it right... right? Joe Burrow will be playing with a much-improved and balanced defense, and Zac Taylor *can* coach, even if recent evidence has been alarming. In an AFC North prone to tripping over itself, there is optimism that 2026 will be a comeback year.

STAR MAN

JOE BURROW
QB

A healthy Joe Burrow is one of the best players in the NFL. Cincinnati has already watched him lead the franchise to a Super Bowl and, with the right support, believe he can do so again. Don't rule out Burrow being an MVP candidate with an improved offense — and the right protection to keep him upright and in uniform.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

AMARIUS MIMS
OL

Offensive line struggles have plagued the Bengals in the Joe Burrow era but, in late 2025, Mims started to show his true potential. As a second-year player, he didn't give up a single sack between Weeks 12-18, and putting together a full season in that form, with Burrow able to fire behind him, would be truly elite.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥

ZAC TAYLOR
HC

As head coach, Zac Taylor took the Bengals to the Super Bowl and then the AFC Championship game, but has missed the playoffs every year since. He can blame misfortune with injuries but, when you see what his contemporary in Buffalo, Sean McDermott, got fired for, then you have to imagine Taylor can't afford another slip-up.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 23	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Dec 31	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	VS

CEILING: *CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP*

FLOOR: *MISSING THE PLAYOFFS*

CLEVELAND BROWNS

OWNER
Jimmy and Dee Haslam

GM
Andrew Berry

HEAD COACH
Todd Monken

STADIUM
Huntington Bank Field

2025 RECORD
5-12

VERDICT Losing Myles Garrett is a hammer blow; muddled approach on offense means another tough year in Cleveland.

QUARTERBACK: ★★☆☆☆
OFFENSE: ★★☆☆☆
DEFENSE: ★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS: ★★☆☆☆
COACHING: ★★☆☆☆

THE CASE FOR

This might be a little difficult. In truth, Cleveland has some strong pieces on defense who are still young — step forward Jared Verse and Carson Schwesinger — but 2026 might be about them gaining reps and confidence so they can be ready-made productive players by the time the right quarterback arrives. Winning now will be exceedingly difficult.

THE CASE AGAINST

The roster is thin in all areas. There isn't a quarterback that you'd necessarily want as a starter, and their best player has just been traded away to a contending team. It's looking bleak around the Browns, with no signs of blockbuster moves that will make the short-term any easier to stomach. There will be losses in 2026 — lots of them.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Jared Verse, LB; Elgton Jenkins, C; Teven Jenkins, G; Zion Johnson, G; Quincy Williams, LB; Jack Stoll, TE; Daniel Thomas, S; Tylan Wallace, WR; Tytus Howard, T; Tre Avery, CB; Corey Bojorquez, P; Sam Kamara, DE; D'Angelo Ross, CB; Blake Whiteheart, TE; Andre Szmyt, K; Julian Okwara, DE

OUT

Myles Garrett, DE; Devin Bush Jr, LB; Martin Emerson, CB; Jerome Ford, RB; Shelby Harris, DT; David Njoku, TE; Wyatt Teller, G, Cameron Thomas, DE; Cornelius Lucas, Ts

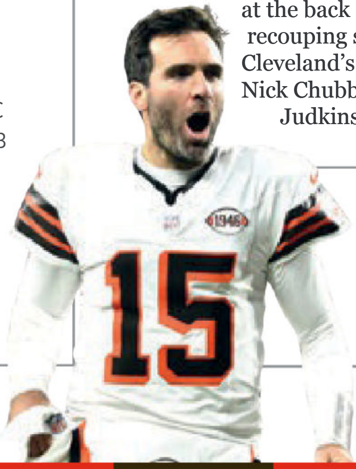
DRAFT

R1, P9	Spencer Fano, T
R1, P24	K.C. Concepcion, WR
R2, P39	Denzel Boston, WR
R2, P58	Emmanuel McNeil-Warren, S
R3, P86	Austin Barber, T
R7, P248	Carsen Ryan, TE
R5, P146	Parker Brailsford, C
R5, P149	Justin Jefferson, LB
R5, P170	Joe Royer, TE
R6, P182	Taylen Green, QB

OFFENSE

As is always the case in Cleveland, quarterback is king... and they don't have one. The Browns head into 2026 with Deshaun Watson, Shedeur Sanders and Dillon Gabriel as realistic options under center. None are long-term answers, but it's likely all three will start games in 2026. Without being able to lean on Myles Garrett's defensive brilliance to keep them in games, the under-powered Cleveland offense will struggle even more this year, although TE Harold Fannin Jr is a bright prospect and two top 39 picks were spent on receiving talent.

The 2025 campaign saw the Browns finish the season with the second worst offense in terms of points scored but, without consistency at QB, this team was never going to click. It may simply be worth trying to develop Sanders for a future trade, as there were glimpses of ability in his cameo as starter at the back end of last year, but it seems the Browns are intent on recouping some onfield value from Watson's painful contract. Cleveland's rushing game was poor in 2025 and, with veteran Nick Chubb still in FA limbo, will rely on second years Quinshon Judkins and Dylan Sampson this season.



KEY STAT

Since their return to the NFL in 1999, the Cleveland Browns have recorded just four winning seasons.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 1	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	AT

CEILING: *FOUR WINS*

DEFENSE

Myles Garrett left Cleveland as arguably the franchise's greatest ever player, and his departure will force others on defense to have to step up. If the immediate future is grim, there are some bright young players on the roster, including DRoY Carson Schwesinger and incoming safety Emmanuel McNeil-Warren. Elite cornerback Denzel Ward insists he wants to remain in Cleveland following Garrett's exit, while Alex Wright can assume the legend's role by building on his 5.5 sacks from 2025.

Cleveland's defense needs to become more of a cohesive unit and, credit to the Browns, their offseason moves have been made to that end. Jared Verse has a very high ceiling, recording 7.5 sacks for the Rams last year and, given time, he and Wright could well form one of the most devastating one-two punches in the league. Browns fans are once again being asked to wait for the future, but there is such little trust in their front office that there must be signs of a defensive powerhouse being constructed during 2026, otherwise belief will be further eroded before next spring. You can't trade away someone of Garrett's value and then not make best use of the pieces that came your way.

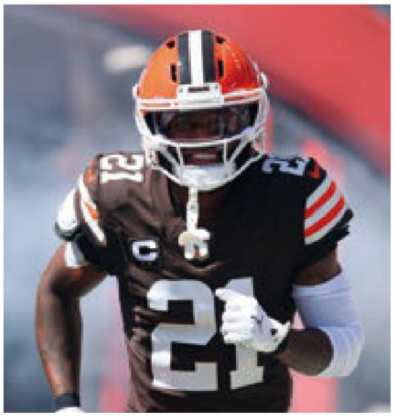
NUMBERS TO KNOW

63.5	1989	102
The margin between Myles Garrett's franchise record 125.5 sacks and second-placed Clay Matthews Sr.	The last season that saw Cleveland win their division.	Number of games under HC Kevin Stefanski, third-most in team history

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

Cleveland will miss Myles Garrett, no matter the benefits of trading him in his prime, but have to seize the chance to become a more rounded team. This roster clearly isn't built to win now, but getting through another year of expensive contracts will help, especially with a loaded 2027 draft class on the horizon.

STAR MAN

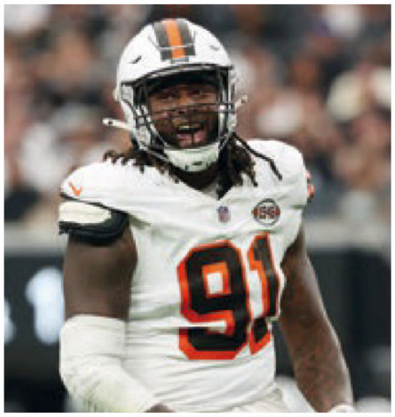


DENZEL WARD

CB

With Myles Garrett's exit, Ward becomes the best player on an alarmingly thin roster. If 2025 was a year to forget for the veteran corner, much of the Browns' hopes of avoiding embarrassment this term fall on his shoulders. He will need to show leadership from the secondary and help a young defense improve game by game.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

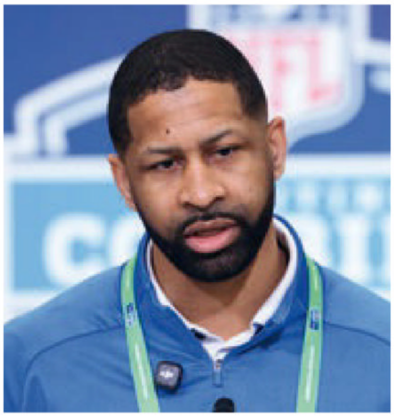


ALEX WRIGHT

DE

Wright was an excellent complementary piece to Myles Garrett in 2025 but, having admitted his shock at the veteran's trade, now has to bond with the incoming Jared Verse and take control of the line. Wright's power and length make him a constant threat and, with a viable running mate, he could comfortably increase his sack count in 2026.

HEAT INDEX 🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥



ANDREW BERRY

GM

Browns fans will tell you Berry's spell as GM has been one disaster after another, and their patience is currently at an all-time low, especially after the Myles Garrett trade. Berry's drafting has been very hit-and-miss too, and the Cleveland brand doesn't seem to increase in value either. He can't afford another dismal campaign.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11.	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	AT BYE	VS	VS	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT

FLOOR: *WORST RECORD IN THE NFL*

BALTIMORE RAVENS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Steve Bisciotti	Eric DeCosta	Jesse Minter	M&T Bank Stadium	8-9

VERDICT

Entering a new era, the Ravens will ride QB Lamar Jackson, but roster strength should allow postseason run.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★★
OFFENSE:	★★★★☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

It's a contract year for Lamar Jackson, and he will be determined to show his worth. With two MVP awards and the talent to reach a Super Bowl, Jackson badly wants to bring that trophy back to Baltimore. Defensively, there are very good players on the roster, which could go far if they gel with the new scheme.

THE CASE AGAINST

A team in transition. John Harbaugh's exit was a shock to the system, although one which some fans will argue was necessary. Harbaugh's defenses were usually his hallmark, so there is still a sense of 'wait and see' with a new HC, even one from the *Jim* Harbaugh tree. The talent is there, but this group finds ways to fall short.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Trey Hendrickson, DE; John Simpson, G; Calais Campbell, DE; Jaylinn Hawkins, S; Durham Smythe, TE; Skylar Thompson, QB; K'Von Wallace, S; Chidobie Awuzie, CB; Tyler Huntley, QB; John Jenkins, DT; Nick Moore, LS; C.J. Okoye, NT; Corey Bullock, C

OUT

Dre'Mont Jones, LB; Isaiah Likely, TE; Tyler Linderbaum, C; Keaton Mitchell, RB; David Ojabo, LB; Daniel Faalele, G; Patrick Ricard, FB; Jordan Stout, P; Alohi Gilman, S; Jake Hummel, LB; Charlie Kolar, TE; Cooper Rush, QB; Tylan Wallace, WR; Ar'Darius Washington, S

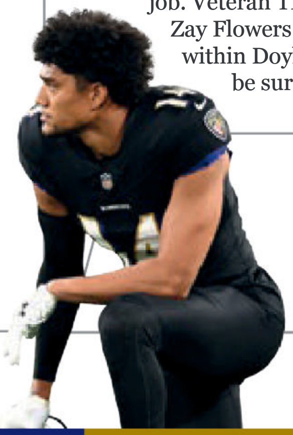
DRAFT

R1, P4	Olaivavega Ioane, G
R2, P45	Zion Young, LB
R3, P80	Ja'Kobi Lane, WR
R4, P115	Elijah Sarratt, WR
R4, P133	Matthew Hibner, TE
R5, P162	Chandler Rivers, CB
R5, P173	Josh Quevas, TE
R5, P174	Adam Randall, RB
R6, P211	Ryan Eckley, P
R7, P250	Rayshaun Benny, DT
R7, P253	Even Beerntsen, Gs

OFFENSE

Lamar Jackson's injuries saw him restricted to just 13 starts in 2025, and this totally derailed the team. However, he will be looking for nothing short of a rebound year where he can return to his previous MVP-level form. We shouldn't forget that, as recently as 2024, Jackson put up historic numbers, throwing for 4,172 yards and 41 touchdowns. Ravens fans will also be happy to see Derrick Henry return after another immense season running the football, but a varied offense is needed. It may be effective from an individual standpoint, but the Ravens can't simply rely on running the ball through Henry.

Expectations are that Baltimore will be much more up-tempo on offense under Jesse Minter and play caller Declan Doyle, which could make them really tough to stop. Whether that limits Jackson's creativity remains to be seen, especially as they've been the NFL's third slowest play-runners since Lamar took the starting job. Veteran TE Mark Andrews remains but is on the down slope, while Zay Flowers alone stands out amongst the receivers. If the creativity within Doyle's offense can bring him into play a lot more often, don't be surprised if Flowers takes a huge step forward in 2026.



KEY STAT

2025 was one of just two occasions since 2016 when the Ravens' defense was ranked outside the top 10 in points allowed.

2026 SCHEDULE HOME ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 5
AT	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS

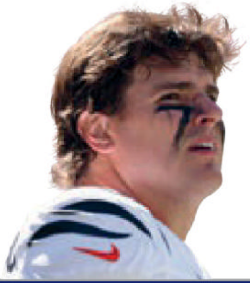
DEFENSE

Trey Hendrickson was perhaps the best free agent available on the market this offseason, and the Ravens snagged him. Of course, he wasn't their first choice, with a previous trade deal for Maxx Crosby collapsing sensationally over an alleged failed medical. It's clear that Baltimore want to build a truly elite pass rush unit, and Hendrickson brings just that as he moves over from divisional rival Cincinnati. Further experience already exits on the roster, with Kyle Hamilton and Roquan Smith giving new DC Anthony Weaver a lot of pieces to work with.

The Ravens were uncharacteristically sloppy on defense in 2025, which contributed in large part to John Harbaugh's dismissal. They conceded too many points, and that obviously needs to stop in 2026, while improving how often they get to the opposing QB becomes an absolute priority after Travis Jones led the team in sacks last year with a lowly return of five. Weaver has been working closely with second-year linebacker Mike Green in an attempt to push him towards a double-digit sack return this season, and he's expected to feature heavily in the new defensive scheme after managing just 3.5 sacks as a rookie.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

317	29	30
Number of games John Harbaugh coached in Baltimore.	Ravens' ranking for play action passes, a staple of Declan Doyle's scheme, in 2025.	Total number of sacks recorded by Baltimore's defense last season.



GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

Baltimore will make the playoffs because Lamar Jackson can make magic happen, but there's a worry Baltimore will still be too reliant on the QB's conjuring and Derrick Henry's rushing. Baltimore will be better than in 2025, but it's hard to make a case for them as contenders.

STAR MAN

LAMAR JACKSON

QB

Few people can play football like Lamar, and he remains the greatest hope for Baltimore fans. Rumours of discontent with the staff over the last year created a cause for concern regarding his contract but, if the Ravens are to achieve anything in 2026, they need a happy Jackson performing to his previous high standards.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

OLAIVAVEGA LOANE

OL

Ioane will be trusted as a starter this year, and is as nasty as he is powerful — enough to bring back an edge to Ravens football. His run blocking is strong too, which can only help Derrick Henry. The Penn State project is a rare case of a first-round selection going into a good situation where he can thrive.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥🔥

ROQUAN SMITH

LB

As the highest-paid member of the Ravens roster after Lamar Jackson, Smith needs to rediscover how to put up elite numbers. The veteran linebacker should be leading the Ravens' defense, but has seen his popularity dwindle over the past year. As much as anything, he needs to convince the franchise to keep him for his last year under contract in 2027.

WK 10. Nov 16	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13.	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Dec 31	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	AT	AT	AT BYE	VS	AT	VS	AT	VS

PITTSBURGH STEELERS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Art Rooney II	Omar Khan	Mike McCarthy	Acrisure Stadium	10-7 (Lost in Wildcard Round)

VERDICT

No Mike Tomlin will feel odd, but McCarthy/Rodgers reunion can bring playoffs if roster is strong enough.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★☆
OFFENSE:	★★★★☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★☆☆
COACHING:	★★★★★

THE CASE FOR

Pittsburgh has a lot of experience on the roster and coaching staff. Aaron Rodgers can still win games on his own, and the offensive scheme will bring D.K. Metcalf back into the elite bracket. Defensively, there's a big unit up front and improved pass rush. Plus Derrick Harmon has more experience under his belt and could become an elite DT.

THE CASE AGAINST

Mike McCarthy's recent record in the playoffs is poor, thanks to his spell in Dallas, and it's undermined his reputation as a coach. Aaron Rodgers will be 43 years old by the time the postseason begins, and bears the scars of recent injuries. It will also take time to adjust to life without Mike Tomlin on the sideline.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Aaron Rodgers, QB; Michael Pittman Jr, WR; Rico Dowdle, RB; Jamel Dean, CB; Cole Holcomb, LB; Cam Heyward, DT; Darnell Savage, S; Dean Lowry, DL; Jaheim Bell, TE; Brandon Johnson, WR; Brock Hoffman, C; Travis Homer, RB; Jaquan Brisker, DB; Sebastian Joseph-Day, DE; Asante Samuel Jr, CB; Jack Driscoll, T; Cameron Johnston, P; Jamin Davis, LB; Robert Tonyan, TE;

OUT

Jonnu Smith, TE; Calvin Anderson, T; Kenneth Gainwell, RB; Isaac Seumalo, G; Adam Thielen, WR; Miles Killebrew, S; Isaiah Loudermilk, DT; Chuck Clark, S; Scotty Miller, WR; Marquez Valdes-Scantling, WR; Calvin Austin III, WR; Connor Heyward, FB; Cory Trice Jr, CB; Kyle Dugger, S; John Rhys Plumlee, WR; Corliss Waitman, P

DRAFT

R1, P21	Max Iheanachor, T	R4, P121	Kaden Wetjen, WR
R2, P47	Germie Bernard, WR	R5, P169	Riley Nowakowski, TE
R3, P76	Drew Allar, QB	R6, P210	Gabriel Rubio, DE
R3, P85	Daylen Everette, CB	R7, P224	Robert Spears-Jennings, S
R3, P96	Gennings Dunker, G	R7, P230	Eli Heidenreich, RB

OFFENSE

Pittsburgh has a strong collection of offensive players. Aaron Rodgers eventually agreed to return for one last crack at a championship, but he will need to rely on a supporting cast that ranges in experience from D.K. Metcalf and trade grab Michael Pittman Jr to 2026 second-round selection Germie Bernard. Another rookie, Max Iheanachor, should be a serious presence on the O-line, which has already improved from a year ago.

Mike McCarthy's West Coast scheme has been brilliant in the past, racking up impressive numbers in Dallas, and Pittsburgh can surge to near the top of the league in passing stats. Whether this will be enough to get them back into contention remains to be seen, but CeeDee Lamb was one of the biggest beneficiaries of the scheme in Dallas, hitting over 1,000 receiving yards in four of his five seasons under McCarthy. Metcalf has similar attributes and could flourish in Pittsburgh. The run game, however, remains something of an enigma, with Jaylen Warren returning and Rico Dowdle and Travis Homer arriving to spearhead a group without a household name.

KEY STAT

Mike McCarthy has won just one playoff game in his last seven NFL seasons as a head coach.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 1	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9.
VS	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT BYE

CEILING: *DIVISIONAL ROUND*

DEFENSE

T.J. Watt staying healthy is vitally important to the Steelers' defensive strength, despite Mike McCarthy having praised the depth of his D-line in training camp. Pittsburgh boasts a bunch of bigger guys on the interior this year, which should be able to dominate when faced with opponents' run games. In a division that boasts Derrick Henry, that's vital. Derrick Harmon was a fantastic performer as a rookie and he can only get better. He recorded 11 solo tackles and three sacks last year, but will be expected to double the return in both categories this season.

Although the Steelers' defense was already near the top of the NFL against the run last year, they really let themselves down against passing plays. Ranked 29th in passing yards allowed is something that the new coaching staff has to fix — and quickly. Getting to the QB is an integral part of that endeavour and, when Watt is healthy, Pitt has a genuinely elite pass rusher. When coupled with a powerful line, the tools are there for the Steelers' defense to be exceptional in 2026. Returning to his home town, McCarthy is well aware of just what Pittsburgh wants from a defense.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

6
Record-equalling Super Bowl haul, but Pittsburgh's last came in 2008.

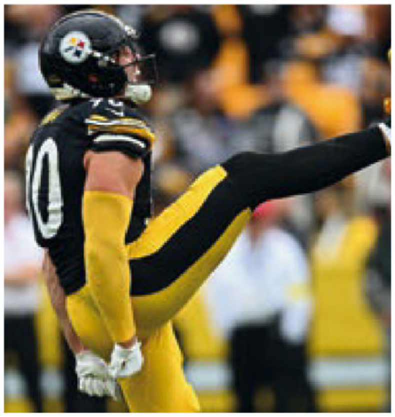
5196
Yards gained on offense in 2025, good only for 25th in the league.

22
Length of time since Pittsburgh last recorded a losing season.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

Mike McCarthy finally has the job you suspect he's always wanted, and his incredibly effective offensive scheme should be beneficial for a Steelers team that has needed refreshing for quite a while. This isn't a one-year reclamation project, however, and despite everyone's best endeavours, they will likely fall short when the season gets serious.

STAR MAN



T.J. WATT
LB

Watt needs to bounce back from a 2025 campaign where he registered just seven sacks but, given his natural talent, if he can stay healthy, he will again be the star performer on Pittsburgh's defense. New HC Mike McCarthy will need Watt to lead and a new defensive scheme could allow him the freedom to use his physicality to wreak havoc.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

GERMIE BERNARD
WR

Bernard might be a second-round pick, but he will likely be a starter in 2026. Whilst behind D.K. Metcalf and Michael Pittman on the depth chart, Bernard should benefit from McCarthy's passing scheme, receive lots of targets and make something happen whenever he has the ball. Aaron Rodgers will also have a target who only dropped five passes in his college career.

HEAT INDEX

AARON RODGERS
QB

This may seem an odd placement. Rodgers isn't on the hot seat in the traditional sense, but it's more of a self-placed pressure. He knows this is his final opportunity to win another championship, and he is determined to do just that.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 27	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 14	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS	VS	AT	AT

FLOOR: *LOSING RECORD?*

STILL STANDING

Written off in New York and reborn in Indianapolis, Daniel Jones faces another career-defining comeback after injury halted the best football of his life.

TOM RITCHIE

CONTRIBUTOR

@tomritchiewriting

Deep in the bowels of the Allianz Arena, Daniel Jones trudges up the podium.

The mood in the Bayern Munich conference room is tense. So tense in fact, that the assorted media — including this intrepid reporter — in attendance after the New York Giants' overtime loss to the Carolina Panthers are deathly silent. For a few moments, Jones scans the room, egging the scribes to ask him a question. He clearly wants this over and done with.

A Giants staffer takes the initiative, asking the signal-caller to evaluate his performance. Jones had thrown two picks in the game. Earlier, his head coach, Brian Daboll, had to deflect suggestions he was considering pulling the fifth-year pro at half-time.

"It's very frustrating," says Jones in decidedly clipped tones. "We came up short. We hurt ourselves a lot. [I wasn't] good enough. Any time you turn the ball over in the red zone twice, it's not good enough."

The towering quarterback scowls his way through a few more questions, before sweeping out of the room and releasing the tension. Just a week later, the inevitable is announced. Jones will be benched in favour of Tommy DeVito for the G-Men's upcoming tilt with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. A few days later, he asks for, and is granted, his release.

* * *

> **"IT'S THE TYPE OF NON-CONTACT INJURY THAT INSTANTLY GETS A SEASONED BALL WATCHER'S HACKLES UP**

Fast forward 365 days, and 'Danny Dimes' is back in Deutschland. This time, he comes out on the right side of another overtime thriller.

Jonathan Taylor's 236-yard explosion carries the water for the Indianapolis Colts in a 31-25 win over the Atlanta Falcons, but Jones plays his part too. With some 225 passing yards, a score, and just the one pick, he performs the role he has nailed down since signing with Indy in the offseason. Dependable, efficient and able to capitalise on big plays, the promise Jones showed in his early tenure in the league is finally coming to fruition. The Colts now boast an 8-2 record, have a historically prolific offense, and are on track for a deep playoff run.

That victory in Berlin, however, serves as something of a high watermark in both the Colts season, and Jones' career so far. A brutal loss to the Kansas City Chiefs and a narrow defeat at the hands of the Houston Texans sets up a must win game over another division rival in the form of the surging Jacksonville Jaguars. On a rain-soaked field in Duval County, Jones drops back to pass. Upon planting his right foot at the conclusion of his dropback, he crumples to the floor. It's the type of non-contact injury that instantly gets a seasoned ball watcher's hackles up. Before the half-time break, the worst is confirmed. A torn Achilles. Surgery needed. Jones', and by extension the Colts', season is over.

* * *

> “I FEEL GOOD ABOUT WHERE I AM, AND KIND OF WHERE THE REHAB IS TAKING ME TO THIS POINT

THE JONES BOY: From having Saquon Barkley in the Giants’ backfield (below), Daniel Jones (above) has another future Hall-of-Famer, Jonathan Taylor, by his side in Indy.

Recovery from such a serious injury adds another question to the litany of challenges Jones has received since he entered the league in 2019. For years, his play has been scrutinised, either to examine his credentials as a starting quarterback, or to wonder if his 2025-turnaround could be trusted. With the Colts’ boasting a talented roster, 2026 promises to be a true examination of whether this much-maligned signal-caller can overcome yet another setback, and lead a side to a deep playoff run.

Let’s consider how this injury may impact Jones’ career, both in the short and medium term. A peer-reviewed study in the medical journal *Foot and Ankle International* (I bet that’s a real page turner - ed.) found the majority of NFL players return from an Achilles surgery within a year of their operation.

Jones has been participating in non-contact 7-on-7 drills in OTAs, and the franchise expects he will be fit to take the field in Week 1 of the 2026 season.

“I think I’m closer, but there’s still work to be done,” the quarterback admitted during the second week of preseason preparations. “I wouldn’t say I’m all the way there at this point. I mean, I feel good about where I am, and kind of where the rehab is taking me to this point — I’ve still [got] work to do and still got to make some progress — but I feel like I’m in a good spot.”

For all Jones’ positivity, however, there is clear indication that there will likely be some drop off in play during the return season. While the impact on quarterback play is less noticeable than in more athletically-driven positions such as running back or linebacker, returning quarterbacks delivered five fewer passing touchdowns on average when compared to the previous season.

That’s not to say that a fully-functioning Achilles tendon isn’t fundamental to playing the position effectively. The ability to drop back and then drive through throws with accuracy and distance is built on the efficient transfer of power from the lower body. Factor in the limitations it can bring in navigating pressure and extending plays, and it can be just as debilitating an ailment for a signal-caller as for any position on the field.

The recent example of Kirk Cousins returning from a torn Achilles is proof of how bad a quarterback can look without that strong base. Cousins signed a bumper contract with the Falcons ahead in the 2024 offseason, just a few months after his tenure with the Minnesota Vikings was curtailed by an Achilles tear in October. Severely compromised mobility, and then the compounding issue of a shoulder/elbow ailment in his throwing line, left the $180m acquisition unable to generate any meaningful zip in his throws.

In Week 13 of the 2024 season, Cousins became the first signal-caller not to register a throw of more than 36mph in the *NextGenStats* era. A week later, he lost his starting job to Michael Penix Jr, and he has now left Atlanta just two seasons into a four-year deal.

> **“ I WAS LIKE, ‘OKAY, THIS IS MAYBE THE NEXT LEVEL OF SOME OF THAT STUFF’**

Looking back over other previous high-profile quarterbacks that have sustained Achilles tears, it’s a mixed bag. Dan Marino’s 1994 season saw no meaningful drop-off in play; the Hall-of-Famer actually picked up the Comeback Player of the Year award as he led the Miami Dolphins to a playoff berth. Aaron Rodgers’ 2024 season was less successful, however.

There are two notable factors to mention here. Marino was never known for his mobility, something that Jones has used to his advantage, especially earlier in his career. Rodgers, meanwhile, was 39 years old when he sustained his injury with the New York Jets. Jones has time on his side; aged 29, he has a far greater chance of making a full recovery. The Colts are clearly hopeful he can approximate the form he showed in the first half of 2025, as they have rewarded the seventh-year pro with a two-year, $88m contract, the most lucrative deal of that length in the history of the NFL.

* * *

The rationale behind that bumper new deal is easy to understand. Implicit in the length of the contract is the idea that the Colts are not mortgaging future cap room in the same way as the Falcons did with Cousins’ fully guaranteed agreement. Jones’ first season pay cheque is fully guaranteed at $50m, with a potential out in 2027. Should the former Giant fail to live up to expectations, the Colts can walk away, carrying a $35m cap hit the following year. If he sticks at Lucas Oil, Jones will have to meet injury and on-field stipulations to realise the remaining $38m due to him, with a high chance of a much-longer deal coming down the pipeline.

The front office may also have been spooked by Jones’ history in New York. In 2023, the Duke alum signed a $160m, four-year deal with the G-Men. The franchise was riding high following an unexpected playoff run, with Jones showing tangible improvement under rookie head coach Daboll en route to a 9-7-1 record. The quarterback posted career-best figures in completion percentage (67.2), and QB rating (92.5), demonstrating a new-found maturity in the pocket in throwing just five picks in 16 games. Factor in 708 rushing yards, and Daboll’s history of working alongside a premier dual-threat passer in Josh Allen during his time as Buffalo’s offensive coordinator, and there was justifiable expectation that Jones could push on in the coming seasons.

However, the passing offense was still pedestrian in many ways. Jones threw for less than one touchdown a game, leading many to question whether he had warranted a deal near the top of the market. Prior to that campaign, Jones had posted a 12-26 record as a starter and, despite being selected with the sixth overall pick in 2019, seemingly lacked top-of-class field vision and accuracy.

An ACL tear in 2023 cut short a season that was already going badly off the rails. While Jones had previously been able to limit his turnover-worthy plays, he threw six interceptions to just two scores during his six starts in the campaign. Whispers of an imminent benching upon his return persisted throughout the 2024 season, and were compounded by his inability to find paydirt at MetLife Stadium. Jones would have to wait until Week 9 to throw his first home touchdown pass of the season, ending a 672-day streak of scoreless games in New Jersey.

The pedestrian output of the Giants offense came to a head in that fateful game in Munich, as a morose Jones’ ended his career with New York on a woeful two-interception game. Eventually landing with the Minnesota Vikings as a free agent until the end of the campaign, the story on Jones appeared to be out. This was a player that could either look after the ball on a stuttering passing attack, or be a liability in protecting it if he attempted to play in a more expansive manner. The quarterback begs to differ, crediting his brief spell with the Vikings for the confidence he carried to Indianapolis.

“I always thought I worked really hard,” Jones told Fox News’ *Fitz & Whit* early in the Colts season, “but then going to Minnesota, I saw how Sam [Darnold] prepared, how [head coach] Kevin [O’Connell] prepared those guys, [quarterbacks coach] Josh McCown, [offensive coordinator] Grant Udinski, and how detailed they were day in and day out on every little bit of the plan. That made a big impression on me and I was like, ‘Okay, this is maybe the next level of some of that stuff’.”

* * *

The idea that Jones could have the keys to an explosive offense was laughable at this point. In fact, when he landed with Indy in the 2025 offseason, many prognosticators expected him to back up incumbent Anthony Richardson; after all, the franchise had invested a fourth-overall pick in the dual threat signal-caller just two years prior.

As it turned out, the Colts had built an offense that merely needed a quarterback that could play within himself and minimise risk. The result in the first half of 2025, after Jones comfortably beat Richardson out for the starting role, was a unit purring at a historically efficient clip.

“You guys heard me talk about the consistency, and that’s really what I was looking for,” Colts head coach Shane Steichen told reporters about the decision to go with Jones to start the season. “Really, the operation at the line of scrimmage, the checks, the protection, the ball placement, the completion percentage, I think all that played a factor in it. I think Daniel did a great job doing that.”

Through the first eight weeks of the season, Indy averaged a godly 33.6ppg at 3.46 points per drive. That was the second most efficient offense to open a campaign since 1978, trailing only the 2007 New England Patriots. They outscored opponents by an average of 14.5 points during that run, and scored on nearly 90 percent of their drives en route to eclipsing 20 points in those first eight games. Taylor led the NFL in both rushing yards and total touchdowns. The superstar back’s dominant stretch was powered in large part by a dominant offensive line. The left-side of the trenches was particularly devastating, as German tackle Bernhard Raimann justified

the hefty contract extension he received in the previous offseason by forming a near-unassailable partnership with All-World guard Quenton Nelson. Indy's 0.23 EPA per play on first and second down put the offense in advantageous positions on third downs, when they were even needed, to keep drives ticking along.

The line held in pass protection too. Jones posted a 55.7 percent completion rate when under pressure, the second-best marker in the NFL. All of that contributed to Jones throwing for 13 scores and just three interceptions in the first half of 2025, while averaging 8.5 points per attempt. Had he been able to keep up that pace, he would have eclipsed career bests in passing touchdowns, touchdown-to-interception-ratio, yards per attempt and passer rating. The month of October 2025 was, by any measure, the absolute zenith of Jones' career thus far, without question. The Colts went undefeated, with Jones throwing for just one pick and eclipsing a 100 passer rating in all four wins.

"Once he got here, I really saw the complete opposite of what everybody was making him out to be," Colts receiver Michael Pittman Jr said of his quarterback. "Having our own experiences with him, he's been the same guy since day one. I don't know why the media portrayed him out to be a guy he's not."

> "THE MONTH OF OCTOBER 2025 WAS, BY ANY MEASURE, THE ABSOLUTE ZENITH OF JONES' CAREER THUS FAR

* * *

For the most part, that success has prompted the Colts to run it back on offense for 2026. The only notable absences from last term will be Pittman — traded to the Pittsburgh Steelers for a late-round pick swap — and right tackle Braden Smith, who was allowed to walk in free agency, eventually landing with AFC rivals Houston. Both moves were largely cap sacrifices, with Pittman's $24m hit to the roster allowance expunged and Smith free to sign a two-year $25m deal in Texas. While Smith is an average starter — *PFF* ranked the fifth-year pro 50th out of 89 qualifying tackles in 2025 — his absence does little to diminish overall strengths of the unit, which sit on the opposite side. Pittman has been a reliable chain mover when healthy, but persistent back injuries stymied his production at times.

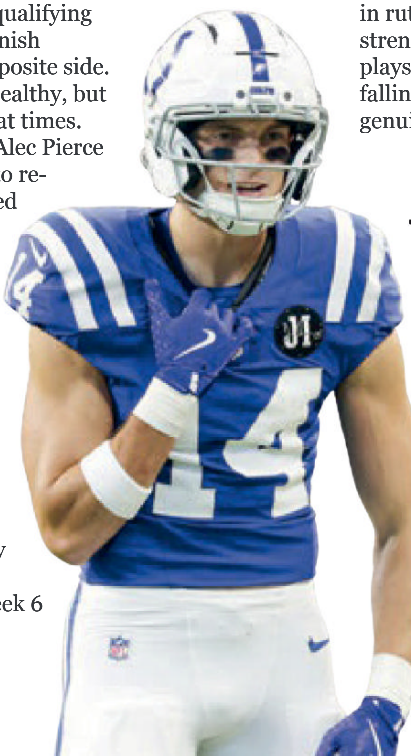
With Pittman gone, however, Jones will need Alec Pierce to emerge as a true number one if the Colts are to re-capture their form this season. Pierce has profiled as a league-leading flyer in his four seasons as a pro, twice leading the NFL in yards per reception. However, he has yet to eclipse 50 catches in a campaign, suggesting that, if he is to justify his lucrative four-year $114m deal, he will have to develop in the short and intermediate areas of the field.

Inherent in all of this is the belief that the Colts are not the team that crumbled down the stretch. It would be easy to chalk their seven-game losing streak up to the absence of Jones, and the freak injury to Anthony Richardson — who sustained an orbital fracture and temporary loss of vision after being hit in the face by an exercise band during pre-game warm-ups in Week 6 — that required rookie Riley Leonard to step into the line-up to close out the season.

There were signs, however, that the offense was already slowing down under Jones prior to his injury. Three interceptions in the Week 9 loss to the Steelers brought back memories of the scattergun play that drove him out of New York, while his completion percentage hovered around 50 percent in the narrow losses to the Chiefs and Texans that immediately preceded the season-ending events in Duval County.

Much of the success of the Colts offense was driven by the performance of Taylor. In the eight wins from the 2025 season, the All-Pro averaged 127.5 rushing yards per game, totalling 18 touchdowns along the way. In the nine games the Colts lost, his average dropped to just 62 yards per game, and he crossed the whitewash on just five occasions. There is a case to be made that, when Jones dropped from the starting line-up, opposing defenses were able to key in ruthlessly on the run game, especially with Leonard's strengths lying in his ability to leave the pocket and extend plays with his legs. However, Jones' own performance falling by the wayside on Taylor's off-days also provide genuine cause for concern.

TANDEM: Taylor (above) and Alec Pierce (below) will need to support Jones on his return.



* * *

Wherever Jones has landed in his career, there have always been question marks. Did he justify the lofty position in which he was drafted in 2019? Was he a $160m quarterback, after just one 'above average' season? Where would he go after being driven out of New York? Is this Colts rebound for real? Can he overcome a serious injury and re-capture that form that had the football public dubbing him 'Indiana Jones'?

The eternal mystery of Daniel Jones is that, more often than not, he answers those questions in a way that begets more doubters but garners some backers along the way. He is clearly made of strong stuff, his resilience maybe his defining trait in a career that has lacked true singular standout

moments. Jeez, the guy played on a broken fibula for a few weeks before tearing his Achilles...

"I think my biggest strength *is* my toughness," Jones has said in the past. "It's something I've always prided myself on, and I think something that is a big part of why I'm here now."

On that day in Munich, I'd assumed his career as a starter was almost certainly over, but here he is picking himself off the canvas once again. Perhaps his most famous play as a pro involved him showing remarkable athleticism in breaking off an 80-yard run, before falling over a phantom tackler en route to the endzone and stumbling down before reaching paydirt.

Jones always seems to break out right before another injury or mishap befalls him. Whether he can finally finish strong in 2026 or not, it will certainly make for uniquely compelling viewing along the way.

INDY MOMENT

Colts offensive numbers 2025

With Daniel Jones (13 games)		Without Daniel Jones (4 games)
28.5	Points per game	14.8
390	Total yards	275
265.5	Passing yards per game	160
68	Completion percentage	61.9
100.2	Quarterback rating	74.5

HEEL TURN

Quarterbacks returning from Achilles injuries

Dan Marino 1994

Simiarly to Jones, Marino's injury came on a routine dropback. In a Week 5 tilt against the Cleveland Browns during the 1993 season, the archetypal gunslinger crumpled to the floor, holding his foot. The torn Achilles cost Marino a 145-game starting streak to open his career, missing the remainder of the Dolphins season as Miami fell to a 9-7 record without their star man after a 4-1 start.

After undergoing surgery, Marino would make a triumphant return on the opening weekend of the 1994 season. 'Dan the Man' torched the New England Patriots to the tune of 473 yards and five touchdowns, setting the table for a comeback season for the ages. Marino tossed 30 scores, eclipsed 4,500 passing yards en route to a Comeback Player of the Year award, a 10-6 record and a postseason berth.

Marino is on record saying he felt he never truly recovered from the injury, as the rehab left his Achilles tendon elongated, reducing his ability to avoid pressure. Granted, Marino was never known for his mobility, but it has always been a key bow to Jones' arsenal. Hopefully, with more than 30 years of progress in exercise medicine and physiotherapy, Indy's signal caller won't suffer the same fate.

Aaron Rodgers 2024

It was all supposed to be so different for Aaron Rodgers and the New York Jets. After departing Green Bay following 18 glittering seasons in Titletown, the league's foremost iconoclast took his talents to the Big Apple. Ahead of his first game for Gang Green on September 11th 2023, Rodgers took to the field carrying an American flag. He received a hero's welcome. What followed started his long and painful goodbye.

Rodgers was injured on just his fourth snap as a Jet, after eating a sack by Buffalo Bills' defensive end Leonard Floyd. The next day, the news came out. A torn Achilles tendon. Surgery needed.

At the age of 39, his return was far from guaranteed. Rodgers himself admits that, at times, he thought his career was over. He underwent surgery, opting for a 'SpeedBridge' procedure, tying the tendon to the underside of his heel and warranting headlines and deep-dives alike.

His rehab was sufficient to bring him back for Week 1 of the 2024 season. The Jets would go on to a 5-12 record, with head coach Robert Saleh fired mid-season. While Rodgers returned serviceable numbers, he clearly lacked the mobility that had flavoured his comfortable pocket presence and ability to extend plays. An acrimonious end in New York ensued, but led to a more successful season in Pittsburgh in 2025.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Carlie Irsay-Gordon	Chris Ballard	Shane Steichen	Lucas Oil Stadium	8-9

VERDICT

Aggressive offseason hints at internal optimism, but hopes rest on the QB's return from injury.

QUARTERBACK:	★★☆☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★★★☆
DEFENSE:	★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

The surprise package in the first half of 2025, racing to 8-2 off the back of a staggeringly efficient run game and career resurgence of QB Daniel Jones. GM Chris Ballard clearly feels that was the true reflection of his roster — not the ensuing seven-game losing streak — and doubled down on 10 free agent signings to push for the division.

THE CASE AGAINST

The first three games of the season could scupper any serious post season push, as Indy kicks off with a tough stretch against Baltimore, Kansas City and Houston. If they fail to pick up a win, there will be serious questions around the long-term viability of both GM Chris Ballard and HC Shane Steichen, derailing their season before it really gets underway.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Nick Westbrook-Ikhine, WR; Arden Key, DE; Daniel Jones, QB; Alec Pierce, WR; Akeem Davis-Gaither; Colby Wooden, DT; Michael Clemons, DL; Juanyeh Thomas, S; Cam Taylor-Britt, S; Blake Grupe, K; Laquon Treadwell, WR; Mo Alie-Cox, TE; Jonathan Owens, DB; Jerry Tillery, DT; Derrick Nnadi, DT; Cameron Mitchell, CB; Easton Stick, QB

OUT

Michael Pittman Jr, WR; Zaire Franklin, DE; Kenny Moore II, CB; Braden Smith OT

DRAFT

R2, P53	C.J. Allen, LB
R3, P78	A.J. Haulcy, S
R4, P113	Jalen Farmer, G
R4, P135	Bryce Boettcher, LB
R5, P156	George Gumbs Jr, EDGE
R6, P214	Caden Curry, EDGE
R7, P237	Seth McGowan, RB
R7, P254	Deion Burks

OFFENSE

The Colts were an offensive juggernaut in the first half of 2025, boasting ruthlessly efficient underlying numbers that garnered comparisons with the 2007 New England Patriots and the 2013 Denver Broncos. While they never truly were as talented as those vaunted groups, they remain a potent unit when fully healthy. The left side of the offensive line remains intact, with German tackle Bernhard Raimann and punishing run-blocking center Tanor Bortolini either side of the perennial All-Pro Quenton Nelson at guard. The trio opened many gaping holes for RB Jonathan Taylor to power through and, if the Colts are to survive a tough start to the season, especially with QB Daniel Jones returning from injury, they will need their superstar running back to shoulder the load. The departure of Braden Smith on the right hand side of the line brings second year pro Jalen Travis into the starting line-up.

With Michael Pittman sent to Pittsburgh in a trade, Alec Pierce is now the main man in the wideout room. The fourth-year flyer will have to develop into a true number one, while tight end Tyler Warren should see his role expand as Nick Westbrook-Ikhine slots into the other starting wideout spot.

KEY STAT

Jonathan Taylor led the NFL in rushing attempts (323) and touchdowns (18) in 2025, while racking up 1,585 rush yards, 46 receptions for 378 yards and two further touchdowns

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS

DEFENSE

The Colts have prioritised depth this offseason, signing a host of rotational pieces at every level of the defense, bringing questions over who will step into starting roles. Second round pick C.J. Allen will likely fill the middle linebacker slot, but it remains to be seen who will join him on the weakside. Akeem Davis-Gaither and Bryce Boettcher look set to duke it out for the role during OTAs. Laiatu Latu, meanwhile, looks set to start on the right side of the defensive line, with free agent signing Arden Key competing with incumbent J.T. Tuimolau opposite. DeForest Buckner's return from a neck injury in the middle adds some much needed star power to a group that is otherwise made up of steady rotational talent.

The Colts real strength lies in the secondary. Charvarius Ward, Sauce Gardner and Justin Walley are one of the league's best starting cornerback trios, and will be backed up by rookie A.J. Haulcy in the strong safety spot and the incoming Cam Bynum at free safety. The defensive backfield will need to maintain its high level of play, however, as some of the questions in the front seven are answered in the early stages of 2026.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

32.6

Colts points per game in the first five weeks of the 2025 NFL season.

22.1

Points per game over the remaining 12 games.

1

The Colts were the first team to finish with a losing record after starting 8-2 .

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

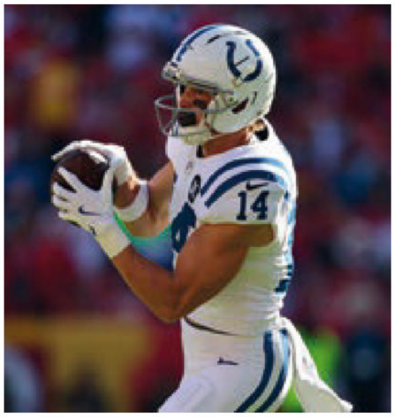
Regardless of the potential on both offense and defense, and the moves made in the offseason, falling to an 0-3 start to the season will prove too much for the returning Daniel Jones to overcome, spelling the end of Ballard and possibly Steichen's time in Indy.

STAR MAN

QUENTON NELSON
G

Winning six All-Pro nods in his eight seasons in the league, Nelson sets the table for so much of the Colts success on offense. Freakishly quick over the ground, his punishing blocks on second-level defenders opens up space for Jonathan Taylor to feast, while his pass blocking is just as precocious. In 2025, he gave up just two penalties on 1,038 snaps.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



ALEC PIERCE
WR

It might seem odd to call the recipient of a four-year $114m deal a breakout candidate, but Pierce hasn't yet posted true WR1 numbers in the NFL, and never eclipsed 50 catches. While he led the league in yards per catch for the past two seasons, he needs to add short and intermediate contributions to provide a return on investment.

HEAT INDEX

CHRIS BALLARD
GM

Carlie Irsay-Gordon has repeatedly stated she has full faith in Ballard to end the franchise's five-year playoff drought. However, such words of affirmation typically come before a parting of ways. Ballard has presided over a slew of near misses since the 2020 postseason, but his seat gets warmer if the Colts cannot rebound quickly following their seven-game 2025 losing streak.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 19	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13.	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	AT	VS	BYE	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS

CEILING: *PLAYOFF BREAKTHROUGH*

FLOOR: *CLOSE BUT NO CIGAR*

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Shahid Khan	James Gladstone	Liam Coen	EverBank Stadium	13-4 (lost in Wildcard Round)

VERDICT

Rousing end to 2025 offset by quiet offseason and poorly-graded draft; can talented roster push on?

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★☆
OFFENSE:	★★★☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

Jacksonville were one of the best outfits in the league over the back half of 2025, riding a prodigious run by Trevor Lawrence and an opportunistic defense to a somewhat surprising division title. If Brian Thomas Jr. can recover his rookie season form, they'd boast a loaded wide receiver room that can help them blow opposing teams off the park.

THE CASE AGAINST

Several notable names have left Duval County, with Bhayshul Tuten now carrying the RB load and Devin Lloyd's leadership missing at middle linebacker. The defensive backfield likely struggles to replicate a +13 turnover ratio, and a first-placed schedule puts pressure on a roster that lacks immediate rookie starters.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Travon Walker, DE; Chris Rodriguez Jr, RB; Ruke Orhorhoro, DT; Dane Jackson, CB; Montaric Brown, CB; Dennis Gardeck, LB; DeeJay Dallas, RB; Quintin Morris, TE; Keith Taylor, CB; Matt Dickerson, DL; Ameer Abdullah, RB; Quinton Bohanna, DT;

OUT

Travis Etienne Jr., RB; Devin Lloyd, LB; Greg Newsome II, CB; Andrew Wingard, S; Johnny Mundt, TE; Maason Smith, DL;

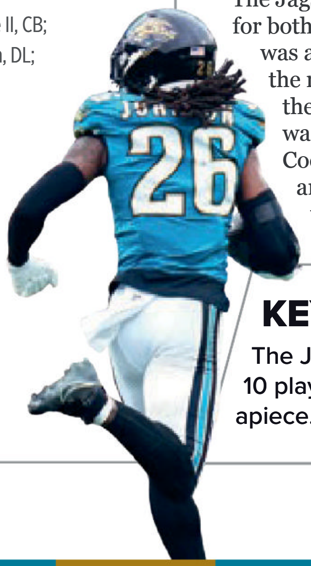
DRAFT

R2, P56	Nate Boerkircher, TE
R3, P81	Albert Regis, DT
R3, P88	Emmaniel Pregnon. G
R3, P100	Jalen Husky, DB
R4, P119	Wesley Willianms, LB
R5, P164	Tanner Koziol, TE
R6, P191	Josh Cameron, WR
R6, P203	C.J. Williams, WR
R7, P233	Zach Dufree, EDGE
R7, P240	Parker Hughes, LB

OFFENSE

While GM James Gladstone's decision to keep his powder dry in free agency raised questions, the strategy is clear. Allowing big names to walk has freed up the purse strings to extend other notable talents. Jakobi Myers has garnered a sizeable contract, while left tackle Cole Van Lanen has demonstrated enough in limited game time to justify a three-year $51m deal. Retaining Myers to operate as the X receiver opposite Brian Thomas Jr, and having Parker Washington operate out of the slot, is a clear roster strength.

The Jags' starting offensive line remains intact, having finished in the top 10 for both run (9th) and pass (6th) block win rate last term. Bhayshul Tuten was a breakout star in 2025, making the most of his limited touches in both the run and pass game to emerge as a more than capable replacement for the departing Etienne. The true driver of the offense's success, however, was the burgeoning relationship between Trevor Lawrence and HC Liam Coen. The QB emerged as a dark horse MVP candidate in 2025, without any notable contributions from Thomas. If those two can get back on the same page, this offense could take another leap in 2026.



KEY STAT

The Jaguars' 22 interceptions last season were shared between 10 players, led by Devin Lloyd and Antonio Johnson with five apiece.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7.	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 5
VS	AT	VS	AT	VS	VS	BYE	VS	AT

CEILING: *DIVISIONAL ROUND +*

DEFENSE

GM Gladstone's strategy could lead to a step *back* on defense. The Jaguars finished as the sixth-rated unit according to DVOA in 2025, thanks in large part to an opportunistic bent that garnered 22 interceptions; the second highest return in the NFL. The volatility of repeating such a return, as well as the absence of key defensive operators, make the Jags' defense a clear regression candidate.

Greg Newsome II, acquired in a mid-season trade with the Cleveland Browns, has been allowed to walk, eventually landing with the New York Giants. That clears the path for Travis Hunter to take a starting role, and the two-way college star will be focusing on defense in the coming campaign. Montaric Brown will start on the opposite boundary, with Eric Murray and Antonio Johnson rounding out the defensive backfield. Devin Lloyd's absence, meanwhile, weakens the front seven. A rangy sideline-to-sideline linebacker with the ability to play in the box, his departure needs to be covered by Foyesade Olokun and Ventrell Miller. The defensive line still retains its stars, with Arik Armstead, Travon Walker and Josh Hines-Allen headlining a group with the ability to get after opposing signal-callers.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

+13

Jacksonville's turnover differential in 2025 (3rd best in the NFL).

+154

Point differential over eight-game winning streak to end 2025 regular season

110

Jaguars points resulting from takeaways in 2025, the best in the NFL.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

The very presence of a Houston Texans franchise determined to bounce back from their 2025 malaise means the Jaguars will have a tough task retaining their crown, no matter how well they play. Another playoff run beckons, but a tough road assignment could be all it takes to fall at the earliest hurdle.

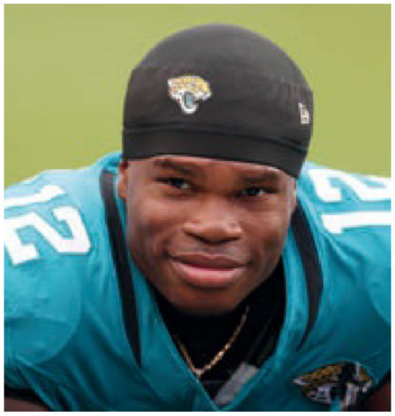
STAR MAN

TREVOR LAWRENCE

QB

Over his last eight games of 2025, Lawrence accounted for 24 touchdowns, threw just five picks and helped Jacksonville to a league-best 33.6ppg. The offense was both explosive and efficient, as they created 39 plays of more than 20 yards over that stretch. It was the type of run that finally realised the immense hype surrounding Lawrence when he entered the league in 2020.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



TRAVIS HUNTER

CB/WR

A non-contact knee injury cut Hunter's rookie season short — and might have changed the Jags' plans for their two-way star, amid suggestions he will be used primarily as a corner in 2026. He showed enough as a cover man in his seven games that, with more time to hone his craft, an emergence would be vindication of the front office's strategy.

HEAT INDEX 🔥🔥🔥

BRIAN THOMAS JR

WR

BTJ's sophomore season was a curious disaster. He and Lawrence failed to connect on almost half of his targets, with Thomas returning just two scores compared to the 10 from his rookie campaign. Rumours of a trade in the offseason failed to materialise, suggesting the front office believe the LSU grad, still uncomfortable going over the middle, can turn it around.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 14	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	AT ny	VS	AT C	VS	AT	AT ★	VS W	AT

FLOOR: *REGRESSION TO THE MEAN*

HOUSTON TEXANS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Cal McNair	Nick Caserio	DeMeco Ryans	NRG Stadium	12-5 (lost in Divisional Round)

VERDICT

Memories of cataclysmic playoff defeat raise questions over quarterback, but defense remains championship level.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★☆☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★★
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★☆☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

The defense. Houston have brought back ten starters from last season's number-one rated unit. A cabal of ferocious pass rushing demons, a disciplined back seven headlined by Derek Stingley Jr and Demeco Ryans' scheme wizardry will keep this squad in any game they play. If C.J. Stroud can limit mistakes, they could be pushing for the AFC Championship.

THE CASE AGAINST

While Stroud actually fared pretty well during the regular season, minimising mistakes and playing the steady hand at the tiller, the meltdown in Foxboro' left a bad taste in everyone's mouth. Defensive performance is also harder to predict, with many league-leading units regressing back to the mean after such a stellar season.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

David Montgomery, RB; Wyatt Teller, G; Marte Mapu, LB; Braden Smith OT; Evan Brown G; Foster Moreau TE; Reed Blankenship, S; Logan Hall, DT; Dominique Robinson DE; Kai Kroeger, P; Evan Hull, RB; Derrick Graham, OT; Ali Gaye, LB

OUT

Christian Kirk, WR; Joe Mixon, RB; Juice Scruggs, OL; Tim Settle, DT; Mario Edwards, DT; Jimmie Ward, S

DRAFT

R1, P26	Keylan Rutledge G/C
R2, P36	Kayden McDonald, DT
R2, P59	Marlin Klein, TE
R4, P106	Febechi Nwaiwu, G
R4, P123	Wade Woodaz, LB
R5, P141	Kamari Ramsey, S
R7, P204	Lewis Bond, WR
R7, P243	Aiden Fisher, LB s

OFFENSE

Despite the torrid end to the season, there are reasons to believe this Texans offense could improve markedly on last year's showing. C.J. Stroud's fifth-year option has been picked up, meaning the Ohio State alum now has two seasons to prove he can be the long-term solution under center. His 2025 campaign, while underwhelming statistically and ending in such calamitous fashion, was deceivingly competent, but he will need to take another leap to quiet his doubters. The return of Tank Dell to the starting line-up should open up the playbook — and free up number one option Nico Collins on the opposite side of the formation. The running back corps also received a significant upgrade with the acquisition of David Montgomery from Detroit, allowing Woody Marks to settle into a number two role. The offensive line has been bolstered both in free agency and the draft. Wyatt Teller will take one of the guard positions, while Braden Smith figures to start at right tackle. First round pick Keyland Rutledge can play at center and either guard spot so, depending on whether he is being groomed to play in the heart of the line could dictate whether he is a week one starter.

KEY STAT

Danielle Hunter and Will Anderson Jr combined for 153 of Houston's total 292 pressures last season, the most (52.4 percent) by any duo in the NFL.

2026 SCHEDULE HOME ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8.	WK 9. Nov 8
VS	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS ny	BYE	AT

CEILING: *DIVISIONAL ROUND RETURN*

DEFENSE

Looking over the Texans projected depth chart reads like a murderers' row. Up front, Will Anderson Jr and Danielle Hunter return, fresh off a combined 27-sack campaign, and their ability to get after the quarterback is the foundation on which HC DeMeco Ryans' strategy is built, as the Texans had one of the lowest blitz rates in the league last season. The interior defensive line remains intact with Sheldon Rankins and Tommy Togiai pencilled in as starters, but second round pick Kayden McDonald should feature on rushing downs.

For the most part, Ryans keeps his guys in their base nickel package. Jalen Pitre is one of the best slot corners in the game, while Derek Stingley Jr basically deletes the opposing number one receiver on a weekly basis. Azeez Al-Shaair has overcome disciplinary issues, and is a dependable cover linebacker that has excelled with greater responsibilities. The only change to the starting line-up comes in the form of Reed Blankenship, who has made the switch from Philadelphia in free agency. However, it is highly likely that Ryans will rotate the former Eagle with Calen Bullock, Jaylen Reed and M.J. Stewart.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

29

Takeaways generated by the Texans defense in 2025.

5

Interceptions thrown by C.J. Stroud in the AFC Divisional Round.

24

Seasons in franchise history without an AFC Championship game.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

With the return of Tank Dell to the receiving corps, and the promise of a shiny new run game, C.J. Stroud should be able to hold this team together long enough for the defense to snatch their opponent's souls. Expect a deep playoff run.

STAR MAN

DEREK STINGLEY JR

CB

Fourth-year corner Stingley Jr authored a truly breathtaking 2025 season, garnering first-team All-Pro honours off the back of 15 pass break-ups, four picks and a measly 67.4 passer rating when targeted. Up for shadowing the very best wideouts in the game, Stingley is the crown jewel in a glittering defensive unit.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

JAYDEN HIGGINS

WR

Higgins steadily grew into the 2025 season. From Weeks 9 to 18, the Iowa State product scored four touchdowns and averaged five targets a game. He figures to slot into the third starting wide receiver spot alongside the returning Tank Dell and clear top dog Nico Collins. With another offseason to fine tune his game, a sophomore breakout could well be on the cards.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥🔥

JAKE ANDREWS

C

With first round pick Keylan Rutledge training as a center ahead of the draft, Andrews will likely face a challenge to his starting berth during OTAs. The former Patriot is a serviceable pass blocker, but has struggled to move the point of attack in the run game. With David Montgomery and Woody Marks central to the gameplan, that frailty could be costly.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 19	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 24	WK 17. Jan 4	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	VS	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS

FLOOR: *MISS PLAYOFFS*

TENNESSEE TITANS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Amy Adams Strunk/KSA Industries	Mike Borgonzi	Robert Saleh	Nissan Stadium	3-14

VERDICT Coaching know-how boosts a young roster looking to build steadily around second-year quarterback Cam Ward.

QUARTERBACK:	★★☆☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★☆☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★☆☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★☆
COACHING:	★★☆☆☆

THE CASE FOR

Cam Ward played far better than his stats suggested, as the Titans showed signs of development after the sacking of Brian Callahan. With a slew of free agent signings on the offensive line and at every level of the defense, Tennessee should be able to build on those green shoots with the well-respected Robert Saleh at the helm.

THE CASE AGAINST

There is a long way to go, as 2025's under-matched roster struggled with a dearth of leadership throughout every level of the organisation. While they have been active in the market, none of their acquisitions are genuine needle-movers, and they will struggle to overcome the strength within their division.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Jermaine Johnson II, DE; Solomon Thomas, DL; Wan'Dale Robinson, WR; Austin Schlottmann C; Cordell Volson, G; Daniel Bellinger, TE; Mitch Trubisky, QB; John Franklin-Myers, DL; Elliott Jordan, DL; Tremaine Johnson II, DE; Alontae Taylor, CB; Cor'Dale Flott, CB; Courtney Jackson, WR; Michael Carter, RB; Hendon Hooker, QB; K.J. Osborn, WR; Mohamoud Diabate, LB; Julius Chestnut, RB; Kylen Granson, TE; Tony Adams, S; Jacob Martin, DE; Malik Herring, DE; Joey Slye, K; Tommy Townsend, P

OUT

T'Vondre Sweat, DT; Chig Okonkwo, TE; Arden Key, EDGE; Corey Levin, G; Mike Brown, S; Xavier Woods, S; L'Jarius Sneed, CB

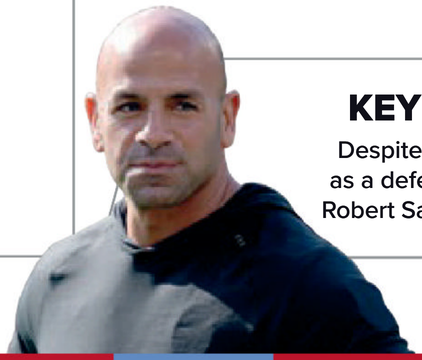
DRAFT

R1, P4	Carnell Tate, WR
R1, P31	Keldrick Faulk, EDGE
R2, P60	Anthony Hill Jr., LB
R5, P142	Fernando Carmona, G
R5, P165	Nicholas Singleton, RB
R6, P184	Jackie Marshall, DT
R6, P194	Pat Coogan, C
R7, P225	Jaren Kanak, TE

OFFENSE

Cam Ward's rookie season was hard to watch at times. A porous offensive line, little evidence of top-tier coaching and up-and-down play from a measly wide receiver corps contributed to the first overall pick finishing dead last in ESPN's QBR metric among qualified signal-callers. Despite all that, his play and the changes made to personnel and the coaching staff have imbued a sense of optimism around this unit. Ward will work with former Giants head coach Brian Daboll who, despite an unceremonious end to his tenure in the Big Apple, remains a well-respected offensive mind and quarterback whisperer.

The additions of Carnell Tate through the draft and Wan'Dale Robinson through free agency completely changes the complexion of the wide receiver room. The Titans will also hope Calvin Ridley can regain his early-career form after a largely anonymous 2025. Austin Schlottmann, another former Giant, looks likely to start at center, while Cordell Volson will take up another of the interior spots. Finding the right mix in the trenches will be crucial as Ward was sacked 55 times in 2025, tied for the most in the NFL.



KEY STAT

Despite a prolific, Super Bowl-winning career as a defensive coordinator, new Titans HC Robert Saleh's record in charge is 20-36.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9.
VS	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT	BYE

CEILING: *RESPECTABILITY*

DEFENSE

Robert Saleh's arrival has seen a complete overhaul of personnel, with as many as six new starters pencilled in on the depth chart. Along the defensive front, former Jet Jermaine Johnson II is the big get, but John Franklin-Myers adds an interior pass rush threat alongside Jeffery Simmons, Jordan Elliott follows his former defensive coordinator to Nissan Stadium to add more heft in the run game and Tremaine Johnson should add pass rush expertise from the outside. Late first round pick Keldric Faulk completes a much-revamped unit in the trenches.

Second round selection Anthony Hill Jr looks likely to take one of the starting spots at linebacker, while Alontae Taylor and Cor'dale Flott are the presumptive starters at cornerback. Although Amani Hooker and Kevin Winston Jr are a dependable pair of starting safeties, there is a lack of depth in the secondary and questions over the crucial nickelback role. Second-year Marcus Harris is slated to start in that position. The biggest question mark remains redzone defense, while the Titans allowed 281 points per game in 2025, the third worst marker in the league, and also lacked explosive plays, with their meagre 13 takeaways the fourth worst return of 2025.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

31.9	-194	6-18
Precentage third-down conversion rate in 2025, second worst league-wide	Tennessee's points differential last season.	Titans' record since firing Mike Vrabel (56-48 in Tennessee) in January 2024.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

Doubling their 2025 win total would be a good start, as progress is all that matters for a franchise that has looked rudderless since their AFC Championship appearances at the start of the 2020s. Despite, and also because of, the personnel changes made, baby steps are that can be expected.

STAR MAN

JEFFERY SIMMONS
DT

Rumours of a mid-season trade away for the all-world defensive tackle rightly sent Titans fans into a tailspin. Simmons was the lone bright spark at times in 2025, posting career-best marks in tackles for loss (17), sacks (11) and forced fumbles (3). Quick, powerful and with great technique, he's a true three-down force.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

CARNELL TATE
WR

The fourth overall pick showed out at early OTAs, demonstrating the precise route-running, smooth acceleration and exemplary body control on sideline catches that made him such a hot prospect coming out of Ohio State. With experienced professionals around him in Wan'Dale Robinson and Calvin Ridley, he has the perfect environment to learn his craft and explode in his rookie season.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥

CEDRIC GRAY + CODY BARTON
LB

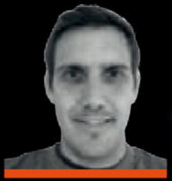
The decision to draft Anthony Hill Jr in the second round speaks to an overhaul in at least one of the off-ball linebacker spots — it's just unclear who will lose their job. Barton played all 1,051 snaps available to him in 2025 and Gray is arguably more expendable, but Hill's play-calling experience at Texas suggests Gray could still hold onto his role.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT

FLOOR: *ANOTHER HIGH DRAFT PICK*

RIDING HIGH

With George Paton and Sean Payton tied to matching long-term deals, the dead money finally gone and Bo Nix emerging as the franchise cornerstone, Denver believes years of careful rebuilding have created something far more valuable than a contender.



ALEX EVANS

CONTRIBUTOR
𝕏 *@AlexEvans487*

NIX
BUFFALO BILLS

From the comfort of his Mile High executive box, Denver Broncos GM George Paton looked down at the field to see Bo Nix shaking hands with Josh Allen, the opponent the second-year quarterback had just vanquished in the most thrilling of fashions.

Only the New England Patriots, an opponent that had been favoured in the eyes of many by a 'cupcake' schedule, now stood in the way of the Broncos returning to the Super Bowl for the first time since Peyton Manning held the Lombardi Trophy aloft in 2015. Ever since then, the weight of expectation has rested heavy on the team's shoulders and only now, after a tumultuous decade, did it appear that the burden was lifting.

A lot of the weight took the form of the $85m in dead cap space that hung like an albatross around Paton's neck, choking the team financially, as a result of the failed Russell Wilson experiment. The former Super Bowl-winning quarterback, whom the Broncos organisation thought was the missing piece of their puzzle, able to lead them back to championship winning ways, did not fit at all. Much to Paton's chagrin, this became obvious only after he had extended Wilson to a five-year deal immediately after joining the team, essentially handcuffing the team for the foreseeable future, limiting who the team could sign and requiring veterans such as Justin Simmons, Josey Jewell and Jerry Jeudy to be jettisoned in the 2024 season.

This meant the team had to rebuild with young and, most importantly, cheap players. The obvious way to do this was through the draft, ensuring they hit with as many picks as possible, especially in the first round. The only problem there, since Paton took over the GM reins from Broncos legend John Elway — and as a result of the draft compensation given up as part of the Wilson deal — Denver has only made three first round selections.

* * *

Paton certainly hit big with his first, taking cornerback Patrick Surtain II, who has become the star of the Broncos' vaunted defense. His most recent day one selection, Jahdae Barron, is promising but it is yet to be seen how well he will develop. Paton certainly appears to have an eye for identifying talent, however, with 16 of his draft selections having received All-Pro honours.

The GM now looked down on the second of those first-round selections, possibly the most important of his career and the final piece of the puzzle to complete the roster he had built into a championship calibre team. Unlike Wilson, this piece fitted, or at least could be moulded to fit the image of the ideal quarterback for new head coach Sean Payton's system. In the two seasons that Nix has been with the team, the Broncos have enjoyed 24 wins and two cracks at the playoffs. The Broncos deposed the Kansas City Chiefs dynasty and reclaimed their place at the top of the AFC West. Whatever is happening, it appears to be working and the Broncos don't want it to stop.

On 8th May, the team granted Paton a five-year contract extension that will see him remain in Denver until at least 2030, allowing him time to fully enact his long-term plan to establish the Broncos as the premier side in the AFC.

"We are pleased to announce a new five-year contract for George Paton that reflects our confidence in his leadership, vision and the overall direction of our team," CEO Greg Penner said at the time. "As our general manager, George has demonstrated a strong commitment toward building a winning roster while forming a collaborative and supportive partnership with Sean Payton. I've enjoyed working with George over the last four seasons and appreciate the alignment we share in positioning the Broncos for sustained success."

Familiarity and continuity are key, with the most successful teams finding an equilibrium between general manager and head coach. With this in mind, the Broncos have ensured they now have both in lockstep, extending Payton for five years in early June, mirroring the contract awarded to Paton and ensuring they will be together to guide the Broncos until the end of the decade.

"That triangle of ownership … and then George, working with him, I've been spoiled because I had a really good experience in New Orleans with ownership and [general manager] Mickey [Loomis]," Payton said following the announcement of his extension. "To go two-for-two with that is hard in our league. I'm thankful they want me back, and we'll do everything we can to keep winning."

Payton clearly feels he still has plenty in the tank in terms of his longevity as a coach.

"I've got a lot of juice left and enjoy what we're doing," the 62-year-old said as he addressed the press after an OTA practice. "Someone asked the other day, 'Do you enjoy it?'. I think, when that stops, is when you've got to look at it, but I'm not at that spot right now."

* * *

Now that the leadership team is locked in and Wilson's dead money is gone, it allows another level of flexibility to construct a winning roster, a relief that Payton shared with the media as he put this year's initial roster through its paces at OTAs.

"It feels good. It's important," he admitted. "It's hard to do that with dead money and, when you do it with a record-setting amount, it's a credit to everyone: the young players, coaches, scouts. I don't know that anyone can physically feel it or see it, but certainly it exists when it pertains to your budget."

So, what to do when the purse strings aren't tied? Give your quarterback a weapon. There is no glaring area of need on the Broncos roster and the receiver room is a strong one, but Paton and Payton are not resting on their laurels and decided to make it even better when it became apparent that Jaylen Waddle was available.

"There was a crystal clear vision prior to the trade as to, 'Alright, this is what we see, this is

SURTAIN II
2

DEAD SURT: Cornerback Patrick Surtain II is proving to be elite in Denver.

> I'VE GOT A LOT OF JUICE LEFT AND ENJOY WHAT WE'RE DOING

where he plays, and these are the things we feel like he's exceptional at', and then applying them into what we're doing," Payton reflected to the *Denver Post*.

What Denver are doing is building a team that wants to win and wants to win together, defying concerns that introducing a new player that instantly becomes the *de facto* WR1 might cause some disgruntlement amongst those already there.

Courtland Sutton has been a long-time star for the Broncos and proved to be a reliable target for Nix over the last couple of season, but was surprisingly amenable to the introduction of another stud to the depth chart.

"I want to win games," Sutton said during team media sessions. "At the end of the day, I want to win games. I think, last year, we saw what it would take for a selfless offense to be able to get to where we want to get to. I don't think that we have any individuals or personalities in our offense that are saying, 'Hey, I need this, I need that'. I think we have a bunch of guys that are willing to put their pride aside and say, 'What do I need to do for this team to be successful?'. I think us seeing that last year, we got to see what that benefit is in terms of overall team success.

"I think having that mentality as an offense and team will ultimately get us where we want to get to. I think last year was a good start and I think that, personality-wise and player-wise, we've added to that, as well as keeping a lot of those guys that understand this idea of success that we are trying to bring to the team, and to this offense in particular. The targets will come — I always say the ball is going to find you, no matter what. You just need to go out there and do your job."

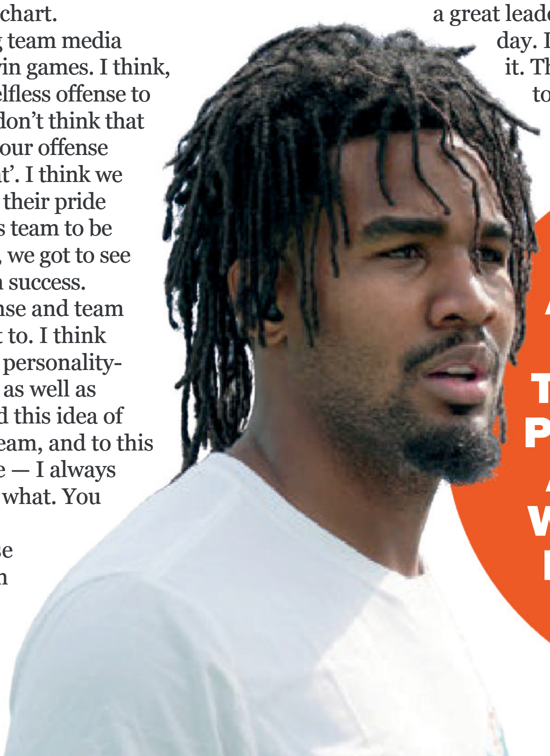
Waddle was just as effusive in his praise for his new team-mate, calling Sutton 'an elite playmaker'.

"Any time you have a playmaker on the other side of you, it just makes it easy," he continued. "It's someone that the defense has to be looking for, and vice versa."

The new receiver has also begun to develop a positive relationship with the man who will be throwing him the ball, sharing how impressed he is with Nix as a person and a player.

"He's different — in a good way," Waddle smiled to the *Denver Post*. "He's in tune. He's a family man. He loves playing football. He loves just being around the guys, and he's got one of them personalities you just gravitate to.

"Bo is definitely a competitor [and] I think he's going to be a great leader. I can just see the traits from him day-to-day. If he sees something, he's going to tell me about it. Then, we kind of pick each other's brains and try to get on the same page as best we can."



> ALRIGHT, THIS IS WHAT WE SEE, THIS IS WHERE HE PLAYS, AND THESE ARE THE THINGS WE FEEL LIKE HE'S EXCEPTIONAL AT

5280
BRONCOS
14
C

WEBB OF INTRIGUE: New Denver OC Davis Webb (above) takes over playcalling duties from HC Sean Payton having previously mentored the likes of QB Russell Wilson.

Whilst Waddle and Nix get to know each other on a personal level, it will still be a while before they can properly connect on the field. Paton's dream of a Super Bowl title as he watched Nix receive the adulation on the field after vanquishing the Bills soon turned to a nightmare. Despite the strength of the roster he had compiled, it just wasn't quite up to par when the key component was missing. The absence of Nix, diagnosed with an ankle fracture in the hours following the win, highlighted how valuable the quarterback is to the effectiveness of the team as a whole. Nix is now on the road to recovery, but still not quite ready to be fully involved with team activities, delaying the development of crucial bonds with team-mates new and old. Waddle, however, still feels he is beginning to build chemistry with the injured passer by being around him.

Payton shared with the team's website that, whilst currently just an observer, Nix 'has been throwing during pre-practice sessions' and that there will be more of an active role for him come the third week of OTAs.

* * *

Payton now has his QB and a *bona fide* young star for him to throw to but, following a moment of stark self-evaluation and reflection after the AFC Championship game, for the first time in his head coaching career, he will not be the one instructing the players what to do on the field.

Despite reaching the conference title game, Payton could see that the offense was not good enough or fast enough. The realisation was enough for the team to part ways with offensive coordinator Joe Lombardi, who did not call plays under Payton, in favour of someone younger and with more ingenuity.

"I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it was going to help our team win," Payton said of the decision to make changes. "You get to a point where you're focused strictly on improving your team any way you can."

Payton was also clear that he didn't want to suddenly realise that his own skills had diminished too much as he ages.

"It is said, as you get older, maybe you don't drive in the rain or at night … I can't let that happen as a play-caller," he said by way of explanation.

Payton has now officially handed over offensive playcalling duties to newly anointed offensive coordinator Davis Webb, who has been dubbed 'The Mad Scientist' by players. Webb has been with the organisation for the last three years as quarterbacks coach but, despite speculation that he could be poached by another team, jumped at the chance to continue working under Payton in an enhanced role.

"The last three years, sitting next to him in every staff meeting, every single offensive game plan meeting, it's rubbed off in a lot of ways," Webb revealed. "It's been a really good start thus far."

Per *Sports Illustrated*, the move to install Webb as play caller has received a positive response as he develops a scheme that should be easier for Nix and the offense to implement, including 'shortening play calls so players can get to the line of scrimmage faster'.

Former Broncos quarterback Ben DiNucci shared further insight into what things might look like under Webb when speaking to the *Up and Adams Show*.

"I think, first and foremost, you're gonna see more of an emphasis on these guys breaking the huddle quick and getting to the line of scrimmage," he confirmed. "I think, with Sean at times, the plays in his offense are just wordy, so you've got to have an emphasis on getting them in as soon as the last play is done. As soon as Davis got in there, at least from what I'm hearing inside that building, is that a lot of the play-calls, the formations, have been tightened up, [made] less wordy, so guys can kind of hear a formation, 'Hey, trips right Steeler,' whatever it is, and it tells you the formation, the protection, and the play, so everyone hears it. You're not hearing a bunch of different words, a bunch of different letters."

"It's a combination of things that [Webb] has learned from Coach Payton and things that he has liked and seen from his own experience of playing and coaching in this league," Sutton told the *Denver Post*. "I know that he is ready, and being able to listen to the way he coaches and the way he is teaching the terminology to us on the field and in the classroom has been amazing.

"I think that he and I being able to manipulate the outside is going to help the run game," Sutton added. "And then, ultimately, whenever we do get a chance to get these one-on-one looks, I think it's going to be interesting to see where that safety decides to shade."

* * *

With an up-and-coming prospect looking to guide the offense to new heights, a more experienced hand will be hoping to keep things on the other side of the ball at the consistently high level it has exhibited of late. Fox Sports lists Denver as having the third best defense in the league, behind only Seattle and Houston, and defensive coordinator Vance Joseph wants to keep it that way.

His unit has retained the majority of its strength, with the only starters that departed being John Franklin-Myers, who signed with the Titans, and Dallas-bound safety P.J. Locke. The addition of Tyler Onyedim in this year's draft looks to address the departures to some extent but, despite the achievements of the remaining players, including a franchise-record 68 sacks last season, Joseph doesn't want the team to rest on its laurels.

> "WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE LACK OF PRODUCTION, MAN, IT STARTS WITH ME

"It's a new slate," star cornerback Pat Surtain II said, explaining the DC's message to media. "Teams are getting better and better, so we've got to find a way to get better than we [were] last year. We fell short [of the Super Bowl] last year, and we've definitely got high hopes and aspirations coming up."

"Coaches say all the time, 'Ah, if we could just run it back, we could go be better' — and then they let half their guys go, sign all new free agents, and you're just like, 'Were they lying to us? What was upstairs thinking?'" Broncos' linebacker Alex Singleton noted. "Instead, we're in an organisation right now where what they've said is completely true. ... Now, we've had a year of winning where we got close but, instead of trying to fix something that isn't broken with new pieces, we just kind of [reunited] the band, and we're going to see what happens. I think we're weeks, months, if not years ahead of a lot of teams in the league."

Where they were not ahead of other teams last season was in generating turnovers, a singular area of weakness in an otherwise top tier defense. The Broncos only managed 14 takeaways during the regular season, and the message that this needs to improve has been clearly shared with the team.

"What he's preached is taking the ball away," safety Talanoa Hufanga said of Joseph, who is returning for a fourth season as the defensive coordinator on Payton's staff. "We did well in third downs and sacks and different things like that but, when you look at the lack of production, man, it starts with me. I've got to lead that better and get guys on it as a group."

With goals of excellence set on both sides of the ball, anything less than a championship will be a disappointment. It is clear that, no matter how strong the roster is on paper and how close they have already come to reaching the summit, Paton and Payton will not stop looking to improve via any opportunity presented to them. The vision is clear and, with contracts locked down, the whole organisation is in step. The team has a defined identity and a sharp expectation of what it expects: To be a Bronco is to be a champion.

Come February, George Paton will once again expect to watch from his executive box as his quarterback celebrates victory on the field. And this time a fracture won't burst the bubble.

DENVER BRONCOS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Walton-Penner Group	George Paton	Sean Payton	Empower Field at Mile High	14-3 (lost in AFC Championship game)

VERDICT Elite defense helps functional offense; if Bo Nix can recover from injury, a title tilt is possible.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★★☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★★
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

The Broncos defense was absolutely elite in 2025, with star turns from Patrick Surtain II and Riley Moss in the secondary and, more notably, Nik Bonitto raising hell with 14.0 sacks. The offense did its job and, if they can improve, Sean Payton's experience can be the difference that takes this side to the promised land.

THE CASE AGAINST

As good as the defense was, the offense started slowly too often, putting the Broncos in a position where they were able to launch five fourth-quarter comebacks in 2025. Bo Nix looks okay under center, and certainly passed the ball a lot, but, if the defense cannot remain an elite unit, the point-to-point nature of the offense puts a serious cap on the team.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Jaylen Waddle, WR; J.K. Dobbins, RB; Alex Singleton, LB; Justin Strnad, LB; Ja'Quan McMillian, CB; Nate Adkins, TE; Matt Henningsen, DE; Jordan Jackson, DE; Jaleel McLaughlin, RB; Adam Prentice, FB; Dondrea Tillman, LB; Adam Trautman, TE; Devon Key, S; Tycen Anderson, S; Lil'Jordan Humphrey, WR

OUT

Dre Greenlaw, LB; Marques Cox, T; Garrett Nelson, LB; Deuce Vaughn, RB; Will Wright, CB;

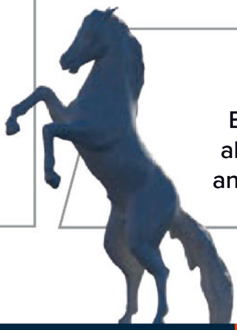
DRAFT

R3, P66	Tyler Onyedim, DT
R4, P108	Jonah Coleman, RB
R4, P111	Kage Casey, T
R5, P152	Justin Joly, TE
R7, P246	Miles Scott, S
R7, P256	Dallen Bentley, TE
R7, P257	Red Murdock, LB

OFFENSE

Joe Lombardi's offense was a middle-of-the-pack unit in 2025, ranking 14th in points scored and 10th in yards. They managed to exceed 30 points only three times all season, and a lack of explosiveness seriously hampered them in the big moments. The loss of Bo Nix to injury ahead of the AFC title game also did the offense no favours when it mattered most. Davis Webb is the new offensive coordinator *and* playcaller, which has surprised many people, and it remains to be seen whether he can engineer a more dynamic unit.

To help his cause, Jaylen Waddle has been acquired via trade from the Miami Dolphins, and the 13.5 yards per reception mark for his career should give the offense a well-needed injection of speed and range. Veteran wideout Courtland Sutton remains on board for another year and has already said he won't mind giving up targets if Waddle helps them over the hump. Evan Engram remains the go-to tight end, while J.K. Dobbins will get initial looks over R.J. Harvey in the backfield, while rookie Jonah Coleman waits in the wings. The O-line is capable of creating opportunities in both pass and rush — the skill players just need to take advantage of them.



KEY STAT

Empower Field at Mile High sits 5,280 feet (1,610 m) above sea level, giving the Broncos one of the best, and most unique, home-field advantages in the NFL.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 14	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 15	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	VS	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT
KC		LA	SF				KC	

CEILING: *SUPER BOWL BERTH*

DEFENSE

The Broncos' defense shut out the sun last season. They ranked third in points allowed and second in yards, while giving up the second-fewest rushing yards in the league. Vance Joseph's side also broke up 94 passes and dished out 68.0 sacks, while hitting the quarterback 164 times. They were mean and remain mostly intact from a year ago, with Joseph also still in town after surprisingly being passed over in the head coaching cycle.

Defensive dominance isn't always sticky from year to year, but there is enough talent on the roster to live with even a minor regression from the studs on the field. A lot of eyes will look to Nik Bonitto to reprise his stellar 2025 campaign, in which he proved a constant menace to opposing quarterbacks, but fellow linebackers Jonathan Cooper and Alex Singleton — now hopefully cancer free — will also require attention. The secondary, meanwhile, is guided by Pat Surtain II, although Ja'Quan McMillian, Riley Moss and Talanoa Hufanga are no slouches. There is depth at most positions, with 2025 first round pick Jahdae Barron and linebacker Drew Sanders, coming back from a season-ending injury, among those listed in back-up spots heading into preseason.

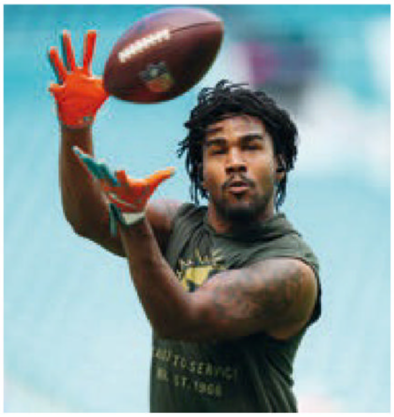
NUMBERS TO KNOW

22	11	515
League-high number of interceptable passes thrown by Bo Nix in 2025.	Number of seasons since the Broncos finished top ten in points scored.	Receiving yards needed for Courtland Sutton to move into fourth all-time for the Broncos.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

The Broncos are a well-coached outfit, but the dynamic-altering shift from Payton as playcaller will be fascinating to watch, especially if the offense struggles out of the gate. Still, this team should be in amongst the AFC challengers when the real bullets start flying in December.

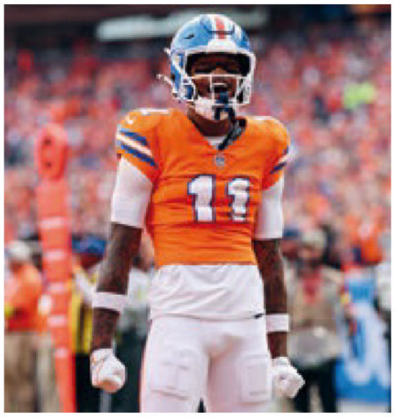
STAR MAN



JAYLEN WADDLE
WR

The price to acquire Waddle — namely first-, third- and fourth-round picks in the 2026 draft — suggests that the Broncos want him to be *the guy* in the passing game. He averages a robust 9.3 yards per target for his career, and has gone over 900 receiving yards in four of his five pro seasons. He'll get the ball a ton in 2026.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



TROY FRANKLIN
WR

Despite the addition of Waddle, Franklin should get the opportunity to build on what was a solid sophomore campaign in 2025, where receptions, yards and touchdowns all spiked from his rookie season. Franklin finished 2025 with 65 grabs for 709 yards and six scores but Waddle commanding a lot of attention will leave him with some favourable looks.

HEAT INDEX

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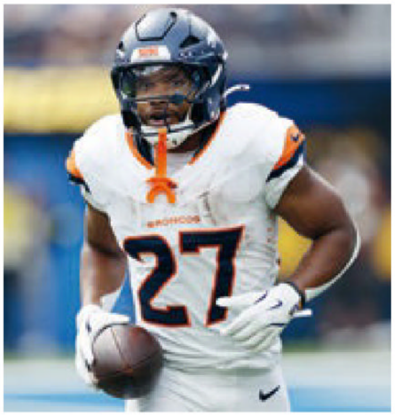


J.K. DOBBINS
RB

Dobbins has endured a frustrating few years, albeit not all his not fault as he's suffered such a run of injuries that he hasn't played more than 15 games in a season through his entire career. Denver didn't spend huge capital at the position, so it looks like Dobbins is their man — but he has to stay healthy with young talent behind him.

WK 10.	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 27	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 25	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
BYE	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS

FLOOR: *WILD CARD ROUND*

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Dean Spanos	Joe Hortiz	Jim Harbaugh	SoFi Stadium	11-6 (Lost in Wild Card round)

VERDICT

Legitimate AFC aspirations if they can stay healthy and keep pace with conference’s elite offenses come January.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★★
OFFENSE:	★★★★☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★☆☆
COACHING:	★★★★★

THE CASE FOR

Justin Herbert remains one of the most gifted quarterbacks in football, and his offensive line is sturdy if it stays healthy (which, of course, is a massive ‘if’). The defense is aggressive, and the Chargers no longer feel like a team waiting for something to go wrong. If Herbert gets support, this team can beat anyone.

THE CASE AGAINST

The passing game can become methodical rather than explosive, and there are questions about whether the receiving corps has a true game-breaking presence. The Chargers have burned us all before, and it hurts to keep going back to that particular well. They really need to do it before we believe they can’t.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

David Njoku, TE; Tyler Biadasz, C; Kimani Vidal, RB; Cole Strange, G; Tony Jefferson, DB; Trey Lance, QB; Denzel Perryman, LB; Dalvin Tomlinson, DE; Trevor Penning, G; Keaton Mitchell, RB; Alec Ingold, FB; Josh Harris, LS; Charlie Kolar, TE; Del’Shawn Phillips LB; Trey Pipkins, T

OUT

Bradley Bozeman, C; Will Dissly, TE; Mekhi Becton, G, Savion Washington, T; Jordan Oladokun, CB; Josh Fuga, DL;

DRAFT

R1, P22	Akheem Mesidor, LB
R2, P63	Jake Slaughter, C
R4, P105	Brenen Thompson, WR
R4, P117	Travis Burke, T
R4, P131	Genesis Smith, S
R5, P145	Nick Barrett, DT
R6, P202	Logan Taylor, G
R6, P206	Alex Harkey, G

OFFENSE

The Chargers leaned into Greg Roman’s preferred formula of controlling games through physicality and efficiency in 2026. They protected the football well and consistently moved the chains, but explosive plays were sometimes difficult to find against elite opponents. The challenge for 2026 will be finding another level, and new offensive coordinator Mike McDaniel can help them do that. Justin Herbert has proven he can carry an offense, but the Chargers need more production from a supporting cast including Ladd McConkey, Quentin Johnston and Tre’ Harris to avoid becoming predictable. Oronde Gadsen provided an unexpected spark in his rookie year and it will interesting to see if McDaniel gameplans for the big TE alongside free agent David Njoku.

If the run game becomes enough of a factor behind Omarion Hampton, Kimani Vidal and the recently-acquired Keaton Mitchell, the offense can force defenses into heavier boxes, and Herbert has the arm talent to make opponents pay — if his playmakers deliver the goods. Of course, a lot will rely on the offensive line remaining intact. Losing both starting tackles, Rashawn Slater and Joe Alt, at the start of last season threw a large spanner in the works and the bench isn’t that deep this time around either.

KEY STAT

Chargers players spent a collective 143 games on Injured Reserve during the 2025 season, including Rashawn Slater who was injured before it started!

2026 SCHEDULE HOME ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7.	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
VS	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	BYE	AT	VS

CEILING: *SUPER BOWL BERTH*

DEFENSE

Jesse Minter's defense were disciplined, tackled well and consistently generated pressure without needing to blitz excessively. Their ability to limit explosive plays helped keep the team competitive even when the offense wasn't firing on all cylinders. Minter, of course, is now in Baltimore, and Chris O'Leary is charged with carrying on the work he started. The Chargers may not possess the star power of some of the league's truly elite units but, fortunately for the new boy, they have enough quality players to remain a difficult match-up week after week.

Locking up safety Derwin James Jr was a major boost for the Chargers over the offseason, and the veteran's partnership with Elijah Molden could take another step as a result. The linebacker room shows signs of ageing with Khalil Mack and Denzel Perryman still holding sway, but Daiyan Henley and Tuli Tuipulotu have shown themselves to be tackling machines over the past couple of seasons. With veteran Bud Dupree and youngsters Junior Colson (if fit) and Akheem Mesidor next up, the unit looks solid. Up front, Teair Tart remains to reinforce the D-line alongside Dalvin Tomlinson and Jamaree Caldwell.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

2119

Passing yards Justin Herbert needs to move into third all-time for the Chargers.

2

Playoff appearances for the Chargers in the last three seasons.

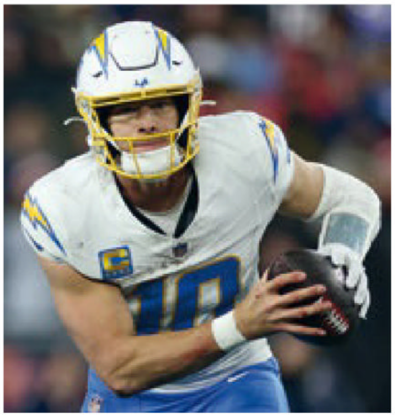
60

Team-high QB hits amassed by Khalil Mack since 2022.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

The Chargers feel closer to contention than they have in years. They should comfortably reach the playoffs, but taking the next step will require them to prove they can beat the conference's heavyweights in January. Of course, optimism is something supporters know only too well heading into July and August, only to see the good times unravel as the year wears on.

STAR MAN

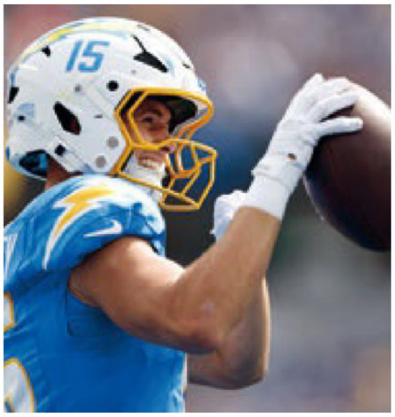


JUSTIN HERBERT

QB

In Herbert, the Chargers have one of the league's premier quarterbacks under center. Herbert possesses the arm strength to attack every blade of grass and the toughness to thrive in HC Jim Harbaugh's system. If the Chargers are to make a deep playoff run, it will almost certainly be because #10 is playing his best football.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



LADD MCCONKEY

WR

McConkey already established himself as a productive player in 2024 before a down 2025, but 2026 could be the year he becomes a genuine star. His route running and reliability make him Herbert's most trusted target, and an offensive coach with a mindset to innovate like Mike McDaniel could help make Ladd the man.

HEAT INDEX

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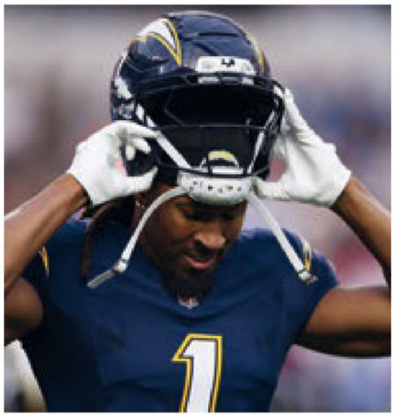

CHARGERS RECEIVERS

The pressure is on the Chargers receiving corps as a whole. Too often in recent years, Justin Herbert has been asked to manufacture offense without enough help from those around him, and needs somebody beyond Ladd McConkey to emerge as a consistent difference-maker, notably from the likes of Quentin Johnston, Oronde Gadsen and recent acquisition David Njoku.

WK 10. Nov 16	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 17	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	VS	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT

FLOOR: *WILD CARD EXIT*

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Clark Hunt	Brett Veach	Andy Reid	GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium	6-11

VERDICT

Bottomed out in 2025 but, with more weapons and healthy QB, should be AFC contenders once again.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★★
OFFENSE:	★★★☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★★
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★☆
COACHING:	★★★★★

THE CASE FOR

Andy Reid is one of the best offensive head coaches in NFL history; Patrick Mahomes could retire tomorrow and make the Hall of Fame; Steve Spagnuolo has created some of the best defenses in the league for a number of years. If the offense can rebound after a down year, then the league needs to watch out.

THE CASE AGAINST

The Chiefs' offense has not looked explosive for two years, with Patrick Mahomes finding little chemistry with a group of inadequate receivers. With Travis Kelce likely retiring at the end of *this* season, Mahomes can't afford to struggle in finding a rhythm and get the Chiefs lighting up the scoreboard...assuming he returns to full health, of course.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Kenneth Walker III, RB; Travis Kelce, TE; Khyiris Tonga, DT; Alohi Gilman, S; Emeri Demercado, RB; Kader Kohou, CB; Kaiir Elam, CB; James Winchester, LS; Tyquan Thornton, WR; Jack Cochrane, LB; Mike Caliendo, G; Justin Fields, QB

OUT

Trent McDuffie, CB; Jaylen Watson, CB; Leo Chenal, LB; Bryan Cook, S; Charles Omenihu, DE; Isiah Pacheco, RB; Derrick Nnadi, DT; Gardner Minshew, QB; Marquise Brown, WR; Jerry Tillery, DT; Dameon Pierce, RB; Mike Danna, DE; Jawaan Taylor, T;

DRAFT

R1, P6	Mansoor Delane, CB
R1, P29	Peter Woods, DT
R2, P40	R Mason Thomas, DE
R4, P109	Jadon Canady, S
R5, P161	Emmett Johnson, RB
R5, P176	Cyrus Allen, WR
R7, P249	Garrett Nussmeier, QB

OFFENSE

The Chiefs' offense looked slow and plodding in 2025, even when Patrick Mahomes was on the field. They finished 20th in yards and 21st in points scored, marking a third straight season of sitting middle of the pack or worse in the latter. Their leading rusher, Kareem Hunt, managed just 611 yards, while Travis Kelce's 851 yards was the second lowest haul of his career. The Chiefs will also be relying on WR Rashee Rice keeping his nose clean and rehabbing from his latest injury if the passing game is to rebound from the horror show of last year, especially while fellow wideout Xavier Worthy recovers from the friendly fire injury he suffered.

Changes on and off the field over the summer see Eric Bienemy back at OC, with Matt Nagy heading to the Giants. Despite a sometime controversial personality, Bienemy will be tasked with getting more explosive plays from his unit, which brought in Kenneth Walker III, fresh from a Super Bowl MVP appearance, to add firepower to the ground game. The O-line is largely unchanged but needs to keep improving in a bid to keep Mahomes upright and healthy for the whole campaign.

KEY STAT

First-round rookie cornerback Mansoor Delane allowed zero touchdowns and committed zero penalties at LSU in 2025.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME

ROAD

WK 1. Sep 14	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5.	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
VS	VS	AT	AT	BYE	VS	AT	AT	VS

CEILING: *SUPER BOWL*

DEFENSE

The defense did a commendable job of keeping the Chiefs in games last season, finishing sixth in points conceded and tenth in yards allowed. Steve Spagnuolo's unit only ranked 25th in sacks with 35, however, as the ageless Chris Jones led the team with a below-par (for him) total of 7.0. Jones will continue alongside rising star George Karlaftis and Felix Anudike-Uzomah this season, with Khyiris Tonga being brought in to bolster the line while rookie R Mason Thomas gets up to speed.

The Chiefs lost two star cornerbacks to the Los Angeles Rams in the offseason so the secondary will look a little different in 2026, but the entire defense benefited from the team's approach to the draft. Having moved up to spend the sixth overall pick on top-rated cornerback Mansoor Delane, the Chiefs then used the 29th selection on DT Peter Woods. Veterans Drue Tranquill and Nick Bolton continue to lead the linebacking corps, but Chamarri Conner is the only survivor from the 2025 backfield, with Alohi Gilman arriving to play free safety and Kader Kohou the nickel.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

285.2

League-high passing yards/ game across Patrick Mahomes' career.

23/51

Regular season games Rashee Rice has missed in his three seasons.

279

Regular season wins for Andy Reid as HC, fourth-most in NFL history.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

The Chiefs, Patrick Mahomes and Andy Reid have earned the benefit of the doubt after a rare down season, but now need other players to start justifying this goodwill and return them to the AFC summit. They'll be sniffing around the first round bye, but they'll likely never be the fireworks show they were in the early Mahomes days.

STAR MAN

PATRICK MAHOMES

QB

It's Mahomes until further notice in this spot. The erstwhile best player in the NFL appears on track to return from the injury that ruined his season a year ago and, as long as #15 is upright, the Chiefs will always have a puncher's chance. But it would be nice if his playmakers, you know, made a play for him.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

XAVIER WORTHY

WR

Worthy has flashed big-play ability in his two NFL seasons, but the Chiefs need him to start contributing regularly and develop a relationship with his quarterback that will smooth over the imminent retirement of Travis Kelce. The Chiefs and Worthy will be hoping to add a lot more than his nine plays of 20 or more yards from a year ago.

HEAT INDEX

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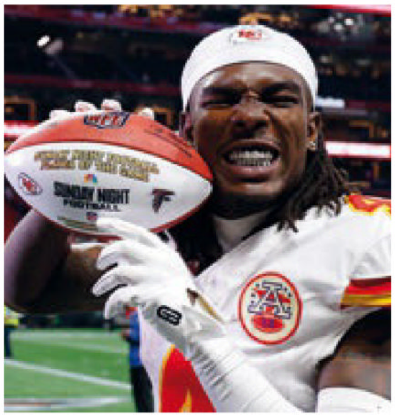


RASHEE RICE

WR

Rice has been a productive member of the Chiefs' offense on the field but, *off* it, he's been nothing less than an embarrassment at times. Heading into a contract season, Rice has already spent part of the offseason in jail after violating probation. He will need to do more than stay healthy and produce if he is to land a bumper pay day.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 26	WK 13. Dec 3	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 21	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	VS	AT	AT	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS

FLOOR: *DIVISIONAL ROUND*

LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Mark Davis	John Spytek	Klint Kubiak	Allegiant Stadium	3-14

VERDICT

Another new era, new staff and first overall pick quarterback means success measured in growth, not wins.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★☆☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★☆☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

A young quarterback, a competent and innovative offensive-minded head coach and one of the best tight ends in the game is good start on offense. If the O-line can grow, maybe 2025 first-rounder Ashton Jeanty can put his rookie struggles behind him and take the pressure off Fernando Mendoza whenever he takes the starting job.

THE CASE AGAINST

Skill position players aren't exactly high class, and offensive line was a disaster last season. Middle of the road defense can hardly be expected to pick up all the slack. Young offense still has some growing pains to work through before the Raiders can expect to return to relevance.

OFFENSE

The Raiders' offense was one of the most pitiful units in the entire NFL in 2025. They were last in points and yards, and the run game, despite spending a first-round pick on a running back, amassed a mere 1,317 yards at 3.6 yards per attempt. Stud tight end Brock Bowers, never really healthy throughout the campaign, managed just 680 yards, while starting quarterback Geno Smith — brought in from Seattle to reunite with season-opening HC Pete Carroll — led the league with 17 interceptions and 55 sacks taken.

Another Seattle connection, former offensive coordinator Klint Kubiak, is now the latest head coach and offensive playcaller in Sin City, and he'll look to bring Fernando Mendoza — the first overall pick in the 2026 draft — up to speed as he begins his NFL career after leading Indiana to a first national title. With veteran Kirk Cousins parachuting in from Atlanta, and center Tyler Linderbaum a big get in free agency, Mendoza will have time on his side, but the supporting skill position players appear to be lacking beyond Jeanty and Bowers. And, if the offensive line doesn't improve, then it will definitely be another long year for the silver-and-black.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Kirk Cousins, QB; Nakobe Dean, LB; Kwity Paye, DE; Quay Walker, LB; Tyler Linderbaum, C; Jalen Nailor, WR; Taron Johnson, CB; Benito Jones, DL; Ian Thomas, TE; Tristin McCollum, CB; Jordan Meredith, C; Spencer Burford, T; Malcolm Koonce, DE; Matt Gay, K; Eric Stokes, CB

OUT

Alex Cappa, OL; Jamin Davis, LB; Brenden Rice, WR; Brodric Martin, DL; Charles Snowden, DE; McClendon Curtis, G; Tyree Wilson, DE; Connor Heyward, FB;

DRAFT

R1, P1	Fernando Mendoza, QB
R1, P38	Treydan Stukes, S
R3, P67	Keyron Crawford, DE
R3, P91	Trey Zuhn III, G
R4, P101	Jermod McCoy, CB
R4, P122	Mike Washington Jr, RB
R5, P150	Dalton Johnson, S
R5, P175	Hezekiah Masses, CB
R6, P195	Malik Benson, WR
R7, P229	Brandon Cleveland, DT

KEY STAT

Expected starting QB Kirk Cousins will have been paid $343m in career earnings by the end of new Raiders deal, with $329m guaranteed. He has one playoff win in 14 seasons.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
VS	AT	AT	VS KC	AT	VS	VS LA	AT NEW YORK JETS	AT SF

CEILING: *FEISTY AND SCRAPPY ALL SEASON*

DEFENSE

If the Raiders' offense was poor, the defense was, in all honesty, little more than a fairly middle-of-the-road unit in 2025. They allowed 5.0 yards per play, which stands up well compared to the Philadelphia Eagles, who are thought of as an elite unit and gave up 4.9. The Raiders allowed just 3.9 yards per attempt on the ground and just over 200 passing yards per game, ranking 18th with 37 sacks.

Rob Leonard, a Raiders defensive coach for the last four seasons, is now the team's defensive coordinator under Kubiak, and got an early welcome present when Maxx Crosby returned to the roster after an aborted trade to the Baltimore Ravens. Vowing that he now wants to spend the rest of his career with the Raiders, Vegas will hope their best pass rusher will be adequately supported by free agent acquisitions Nakobe Dean and Quay Walker to give the team a decent spine up the middle. The Raiders have not struggled to attract talent, with LB Kwity Paye and safety Jeremy Chinn among those to arrive in free agency, but it's now up to Leonard and his staff to mould them into a cohesive unit.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

23

Seasons since the Raiders topped the AFC West and won a playoff game.

9

Different head coaches since 2013 (or Andy Reid's entire Chiefs tenure).

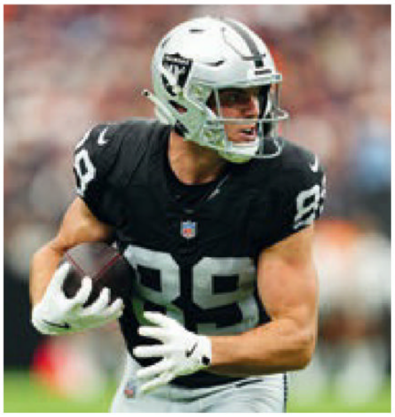
0

Number of games in which the Raiders scored 30 points last season.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

The buzz around the Raiders is mostly positive, but this is still a young and flawed team. The hope is for Kubiak's team to bloody a few noses as they grow into themselves, and not become whipping boys that destroy the confidence of their new franchise passer. They should still be picking towards the top of the draft next April.

STAR MAN

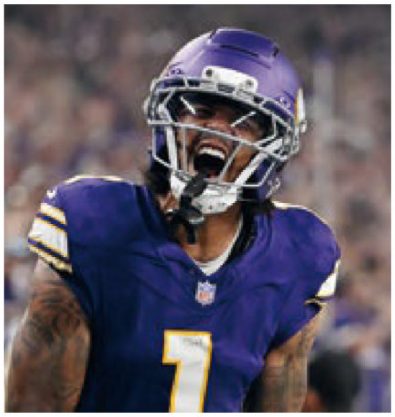


BROCK BOWERS

TE

Bowers was a superstar as a rookie, but fell back a bit in 2025, where injury and the woeful state of the offense hindered the tight end and all others around him. If the Raiders are to establish themselves as an offensive force in 2026, their passing game will have to go through the former Georgia Bulldog.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



JALEN NAILOR

WR

Nailor, an offseason acquisition from the Vikings, has a really good chance of becoming the Raiders' WR1 and the second option in the passing game after Bowers. Nailor averages 15.4 yards per reception in his career and has ten touchdowns on 57 receptions over his last two seasons, where he was clearly third fiddle to Justin Jefferson and Jordan Addison.

HEAT INDEX

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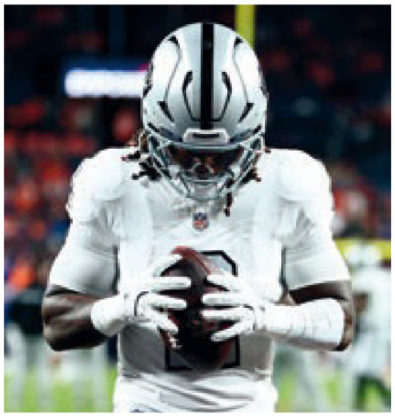


ASHTON JEANTY

RB

Jeanty didn't get much assistance from either the O-line or his sack-happy, interception-throwing quarterback a year ago, but he also didn't help himself with just five explosive runs all season. With everyone on the Raiders facing a fresh slate in 2026, Jeanty isn't exactly on the hot seat, but could do with rediscovering the form that encouraged his early selection in 2025.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13.	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	AT	AT	BYE	VS	VS	VS	AT	AT

FLOOR: *CELLAR DWELLERS*

NFL PRESEASON POWER RANKINGS

It's prediction time as Nicholas McGee puts his neck on the line with our preseason power rankings. Brace yourselves... this might sting!

1. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS
Seattle lost some key players this offseason, and there's reason to worry about their backfield performance when it's led by a rookie, but this is a deep roster, with a defensive scheme that will likely keep them as Super Bowl contenders. The problem is the scale of the challenge coming from inside their division.

2. LOS ANGELES RAMS
Los Angeles responded to losing the NFC Championship Game with a pair of blockbuster acquisitions in Trent McDuffie and Myles Garrett that should elevate the defense to even greater heights. The depth is not on Seattle's level but, with Matthew Stafford back for one more go, the Rams have everything they need to regain the Lombardi.

3. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS
It's easy to be down on the defending AFC champions, but offseason additions have Drake Maye in a strong position. Despite Will Campbell's Super Bowl nightmare, the offensive line is in good shape, A.J. Brown gives Maye a legitimate ball-winning WR1, and the defense has enough to allow New England to return to the biggest stage.

4. BUFFALO BILLS
Josh Allen is under pressure after his playoff meltdown in Denver but, in terms of quarterback, the Bills deserve the most faith. With Joe Brady now HC and D.J. Moore giving Allen an under-rated weapon at a position that has long been a problem, the conditions are ripe for the Bills to end the heartbreak.

5. DENVER BRONCOS
If not for Bo Nix's broken ankle, Denver might have represented the AFC in the Super Bowl. Despite his stellar 2025, Nix remains a question mark on a team that is arguably the most complete in the entire conference, but has a shiny new toy in Jaylen Waddle to help try to silence the doubters.

6. SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS
This might seem high for a team with questions over injury-hit players and ageing stars, but reflects the floor the 49ers have thanks to Kyle Shanahan and the talent on the roster. Defense is the major doubt, but the offense has the tools to be a juggernaut with Mike Evans arriving to be Brock Purdy's WR1.

7. HOUSTON TEXANS
C.J. Stroud is under scrutiny following the Texans' playoff demise last season, but the front office has done a lot to help him out, with smart additions on offense highlighted by the arrival of RB David Montgomery. A ferocious defense should ensure this team is again in the mix to go deep into January.

8. BALTIMORE RAVENS
A ranking based partly on the division, which appears there for the taking. New head coach Jesse Minter needs to return the defense to the upper echelons, and the arrival of Trey Hendrickson following the Maxx Crosby saga should definitely help there. Extensive O-line additions mean QB Lamar Jackson is better positioned to lead the bounce-back.

9. GREEN BAY PACKERS
Complicating matters for the Packers is the fact that they will not have LB Micah Parsons fit until mid-October, while RB Josh Jacobs' off-field issues also present a problem. But there's no doubt that they have an offensive recipe to ensure they can go on a run when Parsons returns to supercharge their defensive efforts.

10. CHICAGO BEARS
Caleb Williams is in a superb environment to continue his rise towards superstardom, with the support of his surprisingly fiery and remarkably talented play-calling head coach and dynamic young talent. The Bears' defense remains a question mark that threatens to limit their ceiling, but the improvement they made in the secondary should help.

11. PHILADELPHIA EAGLES
The Eagles will hope for addition by subtraction on offense with A.J. Brown removed from the picture. There is not a lot of size at receiver anymore and it's fair to doubt their additions in that area. There's no doubting the strength on defense, though, with a series of smart acquisitions sure to have delighted Vic Fangio.

12. DETROIT LIONS
It speaks to how far the Lions have come that going 9-8 last season represented an underwhelming campaign. Detroit responded by solidifying the offensive line and adding defensive depth. Floor and ceiling are both extremely high now, and the team should benefit from a kind schedule to contend in one of the NFL's best divisions.

13. DALLAS COWBOYS
Hype around Dallas is usually unwarranted, but optimism building around 2026 appears more justified. The offense should continue to impress, while the defense is more intriguing following free agency and the draft, with depth to the pass rush, athleticism at linebacker and some outstanding talent in the secondary. They also have a cheat code at kicker.

14. JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

The Jaguars have credit in the bank following a 13-win season and, in head coach Liam Coen, they have an impressive play-caller overseeing things. Still, it's hard to look at their offseason and claim that the Jaguars improved their roster in any tangible way. They should still be a contender, but a step back seems likely.

15. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

Optimism around the Chargers is linked to the hiring of Mike McDaniel as offensive coordinator but just as important, however, will be the performance of Chris O'Leary on defense following the loss of Jesse Minter. There's a high floor here with Justin Herbert, but are the Chargers much more than a wild card team?

16. CINCINNATI BENGALS

The Bengals have upside if everything falls into place — but that is a big 'if' after the recent pivot back to disaster following a couple of years flirting with triumph. Blockbuster defensive additions in Dexter Lawrence and Jonathan Allen provide hope and, if Joe Burrow can stay healthy, there *is* scope to become serious contenders again.

17. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

This is as low as any Patrick Mahomes team can be ranked, but remember he is coming off a serious injury and the roster remains pretty uninspiring. There has been work to improve the defense, front and back, but the offense looks light on difference-makers, even with the addition of Super Bowl MVP Kenneth Walker III.

18. PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Ten years ago, Aaron Rodgers helming an offense featuring receivers like D.K. Metcalf and Michael Pittman Jr could have been a recipe for Super Bowl success. But it's 2026 and reuniting 42-year-old Rodgers with HC Mike McCarthy looks desperate. The defense has talent at every level, but it's difficult to envision any major strides from last year.

19. TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

It feels like the last dance for this Buccaneers era, with Baker Mayfield entering the final year of his contract. Even with Mike Evans leaving, however, the Bucs figure to be exciting on offense, but how far they go likely depends on the performance of a defense that has seen significant change to the front seven.

20. CAROLINA PANTHERS

Despite giving the Rams a fright in the playoffs, the cold hard truth is that Carolina were the beneficiaries of Tampa collapsing in a weak division. Their offseason was impressive, and will markedly improve the defense, but Carolina only goes as far as QB Bryce Young can take them, and the jury remains out on him.

21. INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

The Colts missed their shot last year as they fell apart following QB Daniel Jones' season-ending injury. Jones will be back for Week 1 and has weapons to put Indianapolis back in the playoff mix, but an offseason focused primarily on depth leaves question marks, not least over a pass rush that looks underwhelming on paper.

22. ATLANTA FALCONS

Atlanta has offensive stars — between Bijan Robinson, Drake London and Kyle Pitts — to be appointment viewing, but it's hard to muster excitement entering the Kevin Stefanski era. The lack of interest is compounded by a QB situation where Michael Penix Jr is coming off ACL surgery and Tua Tagovailoa parachutes in on a questionable reclamation project.

23. MINNESOTA VIKINGS

The Vikings should get better quarterback play this year with Kyler Murray, simply because it could hardly be any worse than what J.J. McCarthy and co dished up in 2025. The faith here is linked to the coaching staff, as Kevin O'Connell and Brian Flores remain among the league's best in terms of play-calling.

24. WASHINGTON COMMANDERS

There's pressure on QB Jayden Daniels to bounce back after his injury ruined the Commanders' 2025 season. There's a new OC in David Blough, and the defense ought to be better after significant offseason surgery, but, outside of Daniels and WR Terry McLaurin, there isn't much here in terms of game-changing talent to elevate the roster.

25. NEW YORK GIANTS

Friction between two 2025 draft picks aside, the arrow likely points up under new HC Jim Harbaugh, although betting on him after one of his worst NFL seasons is risky. Despite departures, the Giants still have great defensive talent, but success could hinge on QB Jaxson Dart and WR Malik Nabers developing a rapport.

26. NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

The Saints could be higher following Tyler Shough's impressive rookie season and, having added first-round WR Jordyn Tyson and FA Travis Etienne to the offense, there's expectation of another step forward in 2026. The defense was quietly one of the league's better units last season too, so don't be surprised if the Saints make some noise.

27. TENNESSEE TITANS

The Titans created headlines by reaching for WR Carnell Tate fourth overall, but it should help QB Cam Ward's development — as should the arrival of Brian Daboll as OC under new head coach Robert Saleh. The defense gets an improved front four that features plenty of familiar faces, but this very much remains a rebuild.

28. LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

Ignoring underwhelming options at receiver, it's easy to buy into the Raiders' offense, even if rookie QB Fernando Mendoza doesn't start. Klint Kubiak's scheme should boost RB Ashton Jeanty, while a healthy season from Brock Bowers would make life easier. After his Ravens saga, Maxx Crosby remains the star of a defense improved by veteran signings.

29. ARIZONA CARDINALS

The Cardinals' offseason has, bizzarely, been defined by a contract dispute with Jacoby Brissett, but they're also hampered by a nightmare division in which they will probably finish last. New head coach Mike LaFleur needs to see tangible progress, and will hope that taking Jeremiyah Love with the third overall pick sparks a moribund offense.

30. CLEVELAND BROWNS

Despite the emotional blow of losing Myles Garrett, Browns fans should still have reason for optimism after an offseason in which they improved their offense. The problem now is that they appear poised to start Deshaun Watson at quarterback — and will continue to pay the price for one of the worst trades in NFL history.

31. MIAMI DOLPHINS

Despite the depth chart being a tough read, the Dolphins should at least have a decent pass rush under new HC Jeff Hafley. The rebuild is likely to be long, with a distinct lack of weaponry on offense hindering QB Malik Willis' bid to become the long-term starter, even though De'Von Achane remains at running back.

32. NEW YORK JETS

Based on pure talent, the Jets probably aren't the worst team in the league, especially after a promising draft, but no team starting Geno Smith in 2026 can be hopeful of success, and the defense is still in a bad way. Playing for next year's top pick and a potential franchise QB is Gang Green's current reality.

WASHINGTON
COMMANDERS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Josh Harris	Adam Peters	Dan Quinn	Northwest Stadium	5-12

VERDICT

Overachieved in 2024, fell away in '25. A healthy Jayden Daniels will be key to long- and short-term future.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★☆
OFFENSE:	★★★☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★☆☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

Jayden Daniels was electric as a rookie, and showed an ability to elevate a mediocre cast of characters on offense to levels many thought they were not capable of. A new broom on defense could be enough to mobilise a unit and reduce the pressure of expectation on the offense.

THE CASE AGAINST

The defense was almost historically bad in 2025 and, when your head coach is a defense-focused guy, that raises more than a few eyebrows. The cast surrounding Daniels has not appreciably improved either and, even if he plays all 17 games, asking him to make chicken soup from chicken sh*t might be too much to ask.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Odafe Oweh, DE; Rachaad White, RB; Leo Chenal, LB; Amik Roberson, CB; K'Lavon Chaisson, DE; Chig Okonkwo, TE; Nick Cross, S; Anthony Firkser, TE; Tim Settle, DT; Dyami Brown, WR; Van Jefferson, WR; Charles Omenihu, DE; Marcus Mariota, QB; Jerome Ford, RB; Akhello Witherspoon, CB;

OUT

Marshon Lattimore, CB; Tyler Biadasz, C; Chris Rodriguez, RB; Ja'Corey Brooks, WR; Jeremy Chinn, S; Jonathan Allen, DT; Cornelius Lucas, T; Zach Ertz, TE; Austin Ekeler, RB; Chase Edmonds, RB; Noah Brown, WR; Deebo Samuel, WR; Von Miller, EDGE; Bobby Wagner, LB

DRAFT

R1, P7	Sonny Styles, LB
R3, P71	Antonio Williams, WR
R5, P147	Joshua Josephs, DE
R6, P187	Kaytron Allen, RB
R6, P209	Matt Gulbin, C
R7, P223	Athan Kaliakmanis, QB

OFFENSE

A year after rookie Jayden Daniels propelled the Commanders to the NFC title game, the bottom fell out of the offense as the quarterback missed all but seven games of his sophomore season. As a result, Washington finished 22nd in points and yards despite posting the fourth-most rushing yards in the league. Despite the obvious setbacks, which also saw veteran RB Austin Ekeler lost for the year to an Achilles tear, OC Kliff Kingsbury carried the can and was fired at the end of the season.

Former Detroit Lions back-up QB David Blough is the new OC in the nation's capital, and has openly spoken of the importance of force-feeding WR Terry McLaurin, despite the Ohio State production line veteran often appearing to be the Commanders *only* receiving option. If Daniels can return to full health, and the team can find a spark in the receiving corps across from McLaurin, then they could make some noise on offense. But the receiving corps is still not a strength of this squad, despite the drafting of Clemson rookie Antonio Williams, and more maybe asked of a backfield that added Rachaad White and rookie Kaytron Allen alongside 2025 breakout star Jacory Croskey-Merritt.

KEY STAT

Unheralded seventh-round rookie Jacory Croskey-Merritt helped bail the Commanders out of a running back crisis, leading the team with 805 yards and eight touchdowns.

2026 SCHEDULE HOME ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 19	WK 7.	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	AT ★	VS	VS	VS ny	AT SF	BYE	VS	VS LA

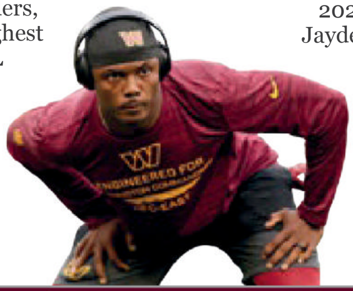
DEFENSE

The Commanders' defense was frankly woeful in 2025, finishing dead last in yards allowed and second to last in turnovers forced. Dan Quinn fired Joe Whitt, his DC and long-time colleague, during the season and took over playcalling himself, but the situation did not really improve. Former Vikings defensive backs coach Daronte Jones is the new DC and, despite the team only having six draft picks, immediately gained a unique weapon after the Commanders spent the seventh overall selection on linebacker Sonny Styles out of Ohio State.

The two newbies are charged with improving one of the worst units in the entire league, which won't take much, but it won't be an easy switch in a division with two potent offenses in the Eagles and Cowboys. Expect the new DC to implement elements of the Vikings defense into his game-planning this year, having spent the past three years at the knee of the unconventional Brian Flores in Minnesota. Styles' arrival, meanwhile, has been complemented by the free agency additions of Leo Chenal (Chiefs), K'Laivon Chaisson (Patriots), Odafe Oweh (Chargers) and Charles Omenihu (Chiefs) — a bunch the returning Javon Kinlaw branded as 'mean m*********ers — boosting optimism in the camp.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

7.1	2290	8.4
Net yards/attempt allowed by the 2025 Commanders, second-highest in NFL	Commanders rushing yards in 2025, fourth in NFL	Percentage drop in completion rate from 2024-25 for Jayden Daniels



GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

As explosive a playmaker as Jayden Daniels is, he is being asked to do an awful lot this season. If the defense does not make exceptional strides, then it may be too much for him to return the side to the postseason after a year out of the playoffs. The Dan Quinn clock is ticking

STAR MAN

JAYDEN DANIELS
QB

After an Offensive Rookie of the Year season in 2024, Daniels featured in just seven games in 2025, going 2-5 while tossing only eight touchdowns. Things were no better in his absence and Daniels was truly missed. Returning to full health and getting the most out of his playmakers will be the key to Washington's success in 2026.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

CHIG OKONKWO
TE

After signing for the team in free agency, former Titans tight end Okonkwo finds himself with few genuine rivals for targets in the passing game behind Terry McLaurin. One of the best Yards After Catch players at his position last year, Chig could provide Jayden Daniels with a reliable safety valve over the middle, and realise career-best figures as a result.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥

DAN QUINN
HC

Quinn is heading into his third season in charge, but a dream NFC title run in 2024 was followed by the bottom falling out of the campaign last year. Worse still, the unit he has specific responsibility for — the defense — was a joke. This is not the Washington regime of old, but another season like 2025 could be curtains for the former Cowboys assistant.

WK 10. Nov 12	WK 11. Nov 23	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	VS	AT	AT	VS

CEILING: *WILD CARD CONTENDER*

FLOOR: *PROPPING UP THE NFC EAST*

DALLAS COWBOYS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Jerry Jones	Jerry Jones	Brian Schottenheimer	AT&T Stadium	7-9-1

VERDICT

Cowboys continue to talk the talk, but their off-the-field actions rarely align. Can this year be different?

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★☆
OFFENSE:	★★★★★
DEFENSE:	★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

The Cowboys offense was a destructive power in 2025, with Dak Prescott's unit scoring points almost at will — and on the ground as well as through the air. An improved defense could be enough to propel them into the contender stratosphere.

THE CASE AGAINST

New defensive coordinator Christian Parker is only one man, and his ability to perform miracles is, as yet, untested. The Cowboys defense could be the biggest opponent their offense will face all year — and the offense might not be up to the challenge.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Rashan Gary, DL; Javonte Williams, RB; Dee Winters, LB; Jonathan Bullard, DE; Brandon Aubrey, K; Cobie Durant, CB; Jalen Thompson, S; Marques Valdes-Scantling, WR; P.J. Locke, S; Derion Kendrick, DB; Sam Williams, DE; Otito Ogbonnia, DT; Corey Ballentine, CB; Reddy Stewart, DB; Matt Hennessy, OL; Tyrus Wheat, DE; Tyler Johnson, WR; Curtis Robinson, LB; Sam Howell, QB;

OUT

Osa Odighizuwa, DL; Solomon Thomas, DE; Parris Campbell, WR; Miles Sanders, RB; Jalen Tolbert, WR; Brock Hoffman, C; Dante Fowler, DE; Payton Turner, DE; Jack Sanborn, LB; Logan Wilson, LB; Juanyeh Thomas, S; Robert Jones, G; Will Grier, QB

DRAFT

R1, P11	Caleb Downs, S
R1, P23	Malachi Lawrence, DE
R3, P92	Jaishawn Barham, LB
R4, P112	Drew Shelton, T
R4, P114	Devin Moore, CB
R4, P137	L.T. Overton, DT
R7, P218	Anthony Smith, WR

OFFENSE

The Cowboys' offense under first-year head coach Brian Schottenheimer was spectacular in 2025. Only the Los Angeles Rams amassed more offensive yards, while Dak Prescott led his unit to the seventh-most points in the entire league. Wide receiver George Pickens, in his first season with the star on his helmet after being traded from Pittsburgh, enjoyed a career year that, along with another strong year for TE Jake Ferguson, made up for a comparatively quiet campaign from CeeDee Lamb, while free agent RB Javonte Williams burst back into NFL consciousness with a 1,200-yard rushing campaign that reignited the Dallas ground game.

Having focused the majority of their draft selections on the other side of the ball, it is just as well that all of Dallas' main offensive pieces are set to return, though the annual Cowboy tradition of messing around with players in a contract year continues to raise questions about Pickens and his state of mind entering the season. If he is on his game, and Lamb returns to something approaching his best, however, the Cowboys should still be able to match teams punch-for-punch in terms of yards, points and explosive plays.

KEY STAT

WR George Pickens had himself a career year after arriving in Dallas, posting 1,429 yards and nine touchdowns on 93 receptions at an average of 15.4 yards/catch.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 8	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 26	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
AT ny	VS W	VS	AT	VS	AT G	AT	VS	AT

CEILING: *DIVISIONAL ROUND*

DEFENSE

The Cowboys' defense was a fictional character in 2025. They allowed the third most yards and the most points across the wider league. No team allowed more passing yards, while only the Jets gave up more passing scores than the 35 conceded by Dallas. Only six teams had fewer sacks too, a sad indictment of the decision to trade away Micah Parsons before the campaign began. Trading away Osa Odighizuwa and Solomon Thomas at the end of the year didn't appear too clever either...

Defensive coordinator Matt Eberflus, already under the microscope after a dismal 2024, paid the price for the pitiful defensive showing, and has been replaced by former Eagles assistant Christian Parker. The new guy is expected to bring more Fangio-esque principles to the team and, with him calling the shots amid a very defense-heavy draft that netted potentially the best overall player in the 2026 class in safety Caleb Downs, the Cowboys should see some improvement from a year ago. With former first-round Jets selection Quinnen Williams now ensconsed and fellow linemen Rashan Gary and Jonathan Bullard signed in free agency, it is hard to imagine how it could be worse, to be fair.

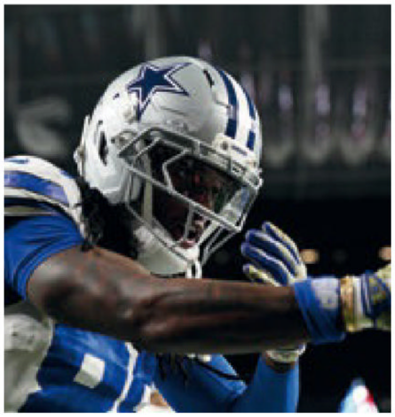
NUMBERS TO KNOW

30	30	251.5
Drought in seasons since Dallas made the NFC Championship game	Average number of passing TDs per season for Dak Prescott	League-high passing yards/game allowed by Cowboys in 2025

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

If you play fantasy football, load up on your Cowboys, as this team will score a lot of points and be fun to watch when they have the ball. But, unless the defense takes several giant leaps forward, those superstars will, like you, be sat at home in January and February.

STAR MAN



CEEDEE LAMB

WR

Lamb took a backseat to a stellar George Pickens last season, but looks healthier heading into the new campaign, which should see him complement his team-mate rather than simply back him up. At his best, Lamb should be looking to return to the form that saw him rack up at least 100 receptions, 1,200 yards and six touchdowns a year between 2022-24.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

DEMARVION OVERSHOWN

LB

Highly-touted when drafted out of Texas in 2023, Overshown's career to date has been a highlight reel interrupted by frequent injuries. A torn ACL ahead of his rookie campaign was followed by a triple ligament tear in late 2024, costing 'Agent 0' a lot of starts. If he can stay healthy, however, Overshown can be the star of this rebuilt defense.

HEAT INDEX 🔥🔥🔥

DAK PRESCOT

QB

Prescott is heading into year 11 and owns most Cowboys' passing records, but just one playoff win since 2018 is beginning to jar with some fans. He is only three seasons removed from a brush with MVP honours, but has gone 10-14–1 since 2024, and will need to be at his best if the Cowboys are to threaten the Eagles.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 26	WK 13. Dec 7	WK 14.	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	VS	VS	AT	BYE	AT	VS	VS	AT

FLOOR: *7-10 AND NO POSTSEASON*

NEW YORK GIANTS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
John Mara & Steve Tisch	Joe Schoen	John Harbaugh	MetLife Stadium	4-13

VERDICT Grabbing biggest name in head coaching cycle good for a potent young D, but offense looks paper-thin.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★★☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★☆☆☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

John Harbaugh comes in as HC with a 180-113 winning record, a Super Bowl title on his résumé, and only two seasons below 0.500 in the last ten years. Expect his system and way of working to get the whole franchise on an even keel and put people in the best position to do their jobs well.

THE CASE AGAINST

The offense, which is severely lacking in star power, is being run by a coordinator whose last employer decided they were not going to fight to keep him. An unimaginative approach on offense could lead to the defensive stars spending too much time on the field, and to the team remaining in the NFC East basement for yet another year.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Isaiah Likely, TE; Tremaine Edmunds, LB; Greg Newsome II, CB; Patrick Ricard, FB; Calvin Austin, WR; Jason Pinnock, S; Darnell Mooney, WR; Daniel Faalele, G; Shelby Harris, DT; Leki Fotu, DT; D.J. Reader, DT; Braxton Berrios, WR; Odell Beckham Jr, WR; Juju Smith-Schuster, WR; Brandon Allen, QB; Jordan Stout, P; Ar'Darius Washington, S; Gunner Olszewski, WR; Jermaine Eluemunor, T; Micah McFadden, LB; Evan Neal, G; Aaron Stinnie, G; Isaiah Hodgins, WR

OUT

Wan'Dale Robinson, WR; Cordale Flott, CB; Daniel Bellinger, TE; Dane Belton, S; Dexter Lawrence, DT

DRAFT

R1, P5	Arvell Reese, LB
R1, P10	Francis Mauigoa, T
R2, P37	Colton Hood, CB
R3, P74	Malachi Fields, WR
R6, P186	Bobby Jamison-Travis, DT
R6, P192	J.C. Davis, T
R6, P193	Jack Kelly, LB

OFFENSE

The Giants were a middle-of-the-road offensive unit in 2025, which says something given the apparent lack of star power on that side of the ball. However, they were dealt numerous injury blows, losing star wideout Malik Nabers early in the season and promising rookie RB Cam Skattebo midway through — just as he was forming a promising double act with fellow newcomer, QB Jaxson Dart. The Giants eventually racked up the 13th most yards and 17th most points, especially once Dart, despite playing somewhat recklessly, assumed the starting role. Despite rushing for almost 500 yards and nine TDs, however, Dart was unable to save HC Brian Daboll's job.

Matt Nagy is the new offensive coordinator with Big Blue but, despite several seasons connected to the Chiefs and Patrick Mahomes, he comes with a less-than-inspiring reputation for getting the best out of his playmakers. The Giants took steps to safeguard their franchise passer by selecting Francis Mauioga in the first round of the draft, but Dart may have his work cut out for him as he looks to improve on his rookie year — especially amid concerns that Nabers might not be ready to go when the season starts.

ny
ENGINEERED FOR
NEW YORK GIANTS
NFC-EAST

KEY STAT

Rookie RB Cam Skattebo led all Giants with 51.3 yards/game in 2025, racking up 410 yards in eight appearances before a dislocated ankle ended his season.

2026 SCHEDULE HOME ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 21	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8.	WK 9. Nov 8
VS ★	AT LA	VS T	VS	AT W	VS ⚜	AT H	BYE	AT

DEFENSE

The Giants were an absolute sieve on run defense in 2025, allowing the second-most rushing yards and the highest yards per attempt on the ground. Their pass defense was somewhat better, but still nowhere near a unit that created fear in the hearts of opposing offenses.

As a result, and largely in line with Daboll's ousting and the appointment of former Ravens HC John Harbaugh in the same position, changes have been rife at MetLife. Former Titans assistant Dennard Wilson has been hired as defensive coordinator, while the Giants added elite prospect Arvel Reese in the draft and will plug him in alongside the likes of Abdul Carter, Brian Burns and Kayvon Thibadeaux in a front seven that began looking more fearsome as last year went on. They also spent a second-round pick on corner Colton Hood but, while the rookies look promising, the veterans — and notably Carter if you can call a second-year player a vet — will need to start proving they are bigger game than name if the defensive side of the ball is to support the offense.

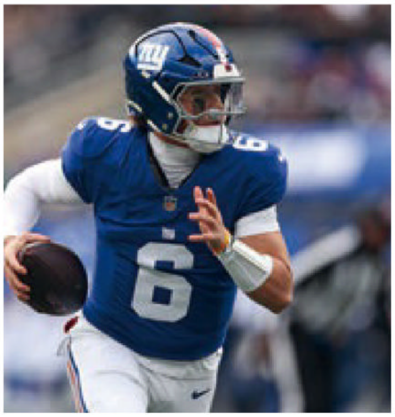
NUMBERS TO KNOW

10	22	9.36
Seasons since the Giants finished higher than 15th in points scored	Number of Giants players landing on IR in 2025	Percentage sack rate suffered by QB Jaxson Dart last season

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

John Harbaugh should be able to lift the floor of a franchise that has posted double-digit losses in 10 of their last 12 seasons. But, make no mistake, this is a long-term project, and expecting the Giants to be among the NFC's elite in his first year is almost certainly too much to hope for.

STAR MAN



JAXSON DART

QB

Malik Nabers would be the guy, but questions regarding his health and readiness mean the tag goes to Dart instead. The QB, despite an often heady style of play as a rookie, at least gave his side a chance to win in 2025 and, with a new staff in place, will be expected to elevate his game in year two.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

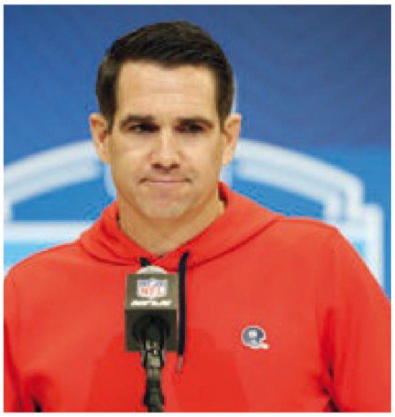
ARVELL REESE

LB

Reese joins the Giants after winning a National title in 2024 and racking up 69 tackles, 10 TfLs and 6.0 sacks for the Ohio State Buckeyes in 2025. Even with illustrious names like Abdul Carter and Brian Burns on the same defensive unit, a game-wrecker like Reese might emerge as its real star as a rookie.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥



JOE SCHOEN

GM

Joe Schoen remains (technically) the Giants' GM, although new HC John Harbaugh seems to have final say on all team matters. Schoen has selected plenty of big names during his tenure, but not really boosted the team beyond a surprise playoff appearance in his first season. Having gone 13-38 over the last three seasons, a disappointing 2026 will almost certainly be his last.

WK 10. Nov 12	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 28	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	VS	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS

CEILING: *STILL BEING 'IN THE HUNT' AT THANKSGIVING*

FLOOR: *TOP TEN DRAFT PICK*

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Jeffrey Lurie	Howie Roseman	Nick Sirianni	Lincoln Financial Field	11-6 (Lost in Wild Card Round)

VERDICT

Talented roster, but vibe never seems to last. Super Bowl or crash-and-burn are the usual options.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★☆
OFFENSE:	★★★☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★★
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

Nick Sirianni has done nothing but win games since he arrived in Philly, and has one of the best rosters in the league, with legit superstars on both offense and defense. QB Jalen Hurts is capable of out-duelling the game's best on the biggest stages, while RB Saquon Barkley can take over a game by himself.

THE CASE AGAINST

The Eagles are starting over — again — on offense with a new playcaller, and face their first season since the end of the first Obama presidency without Jeff Stoutland ruling over the offensive line. For such a talented team, the vibes always seem to be somewhat off with the Eagles.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Jonathan Greenard, LB; Arnold Ebiketie, LB; Dontayvion Wicks, WR; Joe Tryon-Shoyinka, DE; Riq Woolen, CB; Elijah Moore, WR; Andy Dalton, QB; Marcus Epps, DB; Johnny Mundt, TE; Stone Smartt, TE; Elijah Mitchell, RB; Dameon Pierce, RB; Marquise Brown, WR; Braden Mann, P;

OUT

Brandon Graham, DE; A.J. Brown, WR; Sydney Brown, S; Jaheim Bell, TE;

DRAFT

R1, P20	Makai Lemon, WR
R2, P54	Eli Stowers, TE
R3, P68	Markel Bell, T
R5, P178	Cole Payton, QB
R6, P207	Micah Morris, G
R7, P244	Cole Wisniewski, S
R7, P251	Uar Bernard, DT
R7, P252	Keyshawn James-Newby, DE

OFFENSE

A year after riding Saquon Barkley to a Super Bowl title, the Eagles' offense came back to the pack in a big way in 2025. The disjointed and misfiring passing game held them back, and injuries to the offensive line meant Barkley missed out on the wide-open running lanes he enjoyed in 2024. Kevin Patullo took the fall and has been replaced by Sean Mannion, a recent NFL back-up QB who promises to bring a heavily Shanahan-inspired system to the Eagles.

Jalen Hurts faces a learning curve with yet another offensive play caller, but he and the Eagles will be hoping the new offense can help him improve on a five-year low completion rate of 64.8 percent, while hopefully building on a career-high 25 touchdown passes. The ever-dangerous Barkley will also be looking to return to something approaching the form that saw him top 2,000 yards two seasons ago, but the receiving corps has a different look now that A.J. Brown has been traded to New England. In his place, while DeVonta Smith ascends to WR1, comes rookie Makai Lemon, who the Eagles traded places with Dallas to snaffle from under Pittsburgh's nose on draft night.

KEY STAT

The Eagles remain masters of the 'Tush Push', boasting a 63.6 percent conversion rate on all attempts, and 55.6 percent on touchdown attempts.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 28	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 26	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS
W	T	C	LA			★	W	ny

DEFENSE

Vic Fangio's unit more than lived up to its side of the bargain in 2025, as the Eagles surrendered the fifth fewest points in the entire league, holding opponents to a mere 4.9 yards per play. Second-year cornerback Quinyon Mitchell played at an All-Pro level, while fellow sophomore Cooper Dejean remained one of the league's best nickelbacks. Zack Baun followed up his 2024 breakout campaign with another 100-tackle season, and the defensive tackle pairing of Jordan Davis and Jalen Carter both flashed dominance as Philly made the trenches an awkward place for opposing offenses to be.

Having acquired linebackers Jonathan Greenard and Arnold Ebiketie, plus DBs Marcus Epps and Riq Woolen in free agency, Philly took up the fifth-year options of both Nolan Smith and Jalen Carter to ensure a strong core, which subsequently allowed them to focus on offense in the draft. With Fangio remaining in place for at least another season, the Birds will be looking to remain one of the premier defensive units in the NFC, and will be the bedrock on which the Eagles look to secure a third-straight NFC East title.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

72.8

Devonta Smith's receiving yards/game with A.J. Brown out of the lineup.

5.5

Jalen Hurts' career-high touchdown/pass attempt percentage in 2025

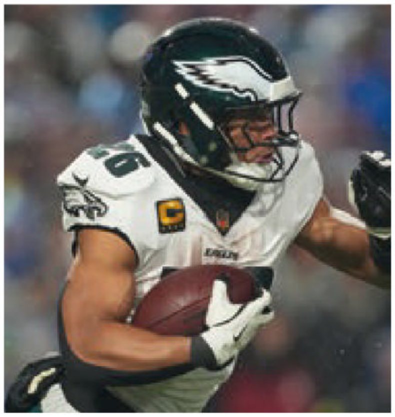
1

Eagles ranking in passing touchdowns allowed in 2025

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

If the new offense can bed in, and the old defense remain dominant, then the Eagles certainly have another title tilt in them. But, if the offense struggles again, and the A.J. Brown-less locker room remains a place of turmoil and finger-pointing, they could miss the playoffs for the first time under Sirianni — and that could be curtains for many across the team.

STAR MAN

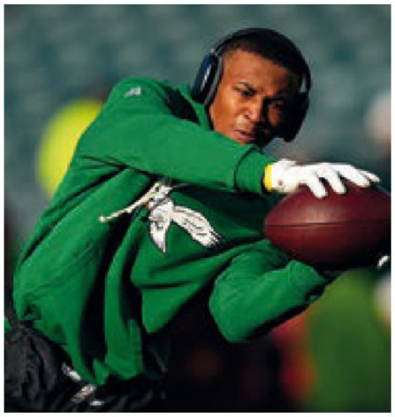


SAQUON BARKLEY

RB

Barkley was never going to come close to matching his 2024 deeds last season, but a year in a new, run-focused scheme, with healthier offensive linemen ahead of him, should see the former Nittany Lion once again become the focal point of the Eagles' offense. The run game flows mainly through Barkley since he signed, and likely will again.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



DEVONTA SMITH

WR

It's a bit weird to classify Smith as a breakout given three seasons of at least 1,000-yards in the last five but, with A.J. Brown finally done in Philadelphia, 'Smitty' should be the undisputed top dog in the Eagles passing game in 2026, and has a chance to post truly elite numbers in OC Sean Mannion's new scheme.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥🔥

NICK SIRIANNI

HC

Sirianni has one of the highest winning percentages in NFL history and has consistently made the playoffs — and two Super Bowls — in his five seasons in Philly, but two of the last three have seen a collapse down the stretch amid rumours of a toxic atmosphere. Expectations for the coach of such a talented roster mean another down year could be terminal for Sirianni.

WK 10.	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 26	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 19	WK 16. Dec 24	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
BYE	VS	AT	AT	VS	VS	VS	AT	AT

CEILING: *SUPER BOWL CHAMPIONS*

FLOOR: *WILD CARD ROUND*

THE NEW LONG GAME

CRUCIAL
CATCH
INTERCEPT CANCER
FJ
90

STAR
WINSTAR
AT&T STADIUM

CRAIG LLEWELLYN
EDITOR
𝕏 *@craig_gridiron*

Brandon Aubrey's remarkable rise from soccer pro to the NFL's highest-paid kicker is changing how teams view football's once overlooked position.

> “ **THEY DIDN'T WANT TO GIVE US THE BALL BACK *ANYWHERE* ON THE FIELD**

Somewhere around midfield, ten years ago, the dimensions of an NFL game began to shift. Offensive coordinators become more adventurous, realising that there was now another player on the sideline that could affect the outcome of games from that range. What was once considered no-man's land for most beyond the strongest-armed quarterbacks gradually became a land of opportunity.

For years, the kicker occupied an odd place within football's ecosystem, a specialist whose importance was measured almost exclusively in percentages and whose impact rarely extended beyond the moment his foot met the ball. But, in an era of expanding range and increasingly aggressive analytics, the position has evolved into something more nuanced. Elite kickers are doing more than simply finishing drives, and are now influencing how opponents defend against them.

Few players embody that shift more completely than Brandon Aubrey. The Dallas Cowboys' All-Pro became the highest-paid kicker in NFL history this offseason, signing a four-year extension worth $28m. Yet, when asked what would have seemed more improbable five years ago – the money or the idea that opponents would actively account for his presence when constructing game plans – Aubrey's answer is immediate.

“It's the latter,” he tells *Gridiron* from the Cowboys facility in Frisco. “That teams are, or at least consider, talking about changing their defensive gameplan based on me, just a kicker, is odd to hear.

“But it's real. I know, in talking to Packers players at the Pro Bowl, that they mentioned they changed the way they played the overtime game [in September 2025], just because they didn't want to give us the ball back anywhere on the field. That's is a really nice thing to hear said about you.”

For Aubrey, the compliment confirmed something coaches inside the Cowboys organisation had understood long before much of the rest of the league. That with a cannon-legged kicker in the building, calculations far beyond simply defending the field were changing — and the specialist was now a legitimate part of the offensive arsenal.

* * *

“YOU WON’T STICK AROUND IF YOU DON’T HIT A CERTAIN PERCENTAGE

Kickers, like punters and long snappers, once existed on the periphery of roster building, but the NFL’s evolving landscape has steadily dragged them towards the centre. Long-range accuracy no longer merely steals points, but can extend drives without requiring first downs and, perhaps more importantly in an era where single points frequently decide games, can transform the final seconds of a half into legitimate scoring opportunities rather than heaves of desperation.

The Cowboys were already immersed in that reality when they sat down to negotiate with Aubrey.

“I think it’s more of a personal validation,” the kicker says. “The Cowboys were very fair with me, opening up saying, ‘We want you to be the highest-paid kicker [because] we think you’re the best kicker in the league’.

“They recognised that the salary cap was going up and contracts as a whole have gone up, but the kicker market kind of lagged behind, so they wanted to push that forward and get it moving again. But, yeah, the Cowboys said personally, to me, that they wanted me to be the highest-paid kicker and that was our starting point for negotiation. I think that is very flattering.”

Consistency remains king in the kicking game. No amount of spectacular distance can compensate for unreliability from conventional range, but what separates the merely dependable from the genuinely transformative lies around the 50-yard line.

“I think consistency is always the first thing you look at,” Aubrey confirms. “It’s the benchmark. You won’t stick around if you don’t hit a certain percentage of your field goals at certain benchmarks.

LONG SHOT: Aubrey and NBA star Stephen Curry (below) share a love of ‘hoisting threes’.

“But then the thing that puts you over the top and kind of moves the needle is that [longer] range, which helps put fear into teams in terms of game-planning and moves the line of confrontation at the end of halves and end of games. Even now, we’ve attempted a bunch of 60-yard+ field goals in first and third quarters, even on the first drives of games, which is not common. I don’t really think any other kickers are doing that, and I think that’s helped really drive the market forward for me.”

* * *

That ‘line of confrontation’, as Aubrey calls it, is perhaps the most fascinating element of the modern kicking game, because every defense has one — and everyone on the field knows where it is.

“You can see the offensive play calling is very aggressive, trying to get to a certain line and then, when we get there, it kind of backs off,” he says. “You can kind of see where the corners will stop. That’s where they think that the range is. They’ll defend that line and, if we get past it, then they start getting more aggressive and trying to call plays that might *lose* us yards. Meanwhile, we’re trying to call plays that *won’t* lose us yards, so you can see it on both sides.”

Fifty-two yards represents what Tom Brady describes as football’s ‘line of demarcation’, a distance beyond which coaches became increasingly uncomfortable and possession, field position and percentages often trumped ambition. Speaking during a Cowboys-Ravens broadcast in 2024, however, the Hall of Fame-bound quarterback likened Aubrey to Stephen Curry, basketball’s revolutionary three-point shooter, and argued that the mental barriers surrounding long field goals had finally been broken.

“It’s interesting as you see all these long field goals being taken now in the NFL,” Brady observed. “I played for a long time, and the thought of a 52-yard field goal was kind of always the line of demarcation. But that mental block, that brain barrier, has been broken by NFL kickers at this point.”

Brady’s choice of comparison is apposite. Curry transformed basketball not simply because he made difficult shots, but because his range altered how opponents defended and how coaches designed offenses. Aubrey’s influence on the NFL feels remarkably similar.

“It used to be that a 40-yarder was a long one,” former Colts punter Pat McAfee commented. “Now, if you’re missing 40-yarders, you’re not even in the Arena League!”

For once, football’s invisible boundaries are not being rewritten by a quarterback or a receiver, but by a player the Cowboys star still describes, almost sheepishly, as ‘just a kicker’.

> **“ PRESSURE IS A PRIVILEGE**

* * *

Long before he was splitting uprights from distances most coaches once considered reckless, Brandon Aubrey was trying to avoid moments exactly like that, and the irony is not lost on him.

Today, thousands inside AT&T Stadium expect perfection. Television cameras know what is coming. Team-mates celebrate before the ball has even sailed through the posts. Butt there was a time when the attention that accompanies pressure was something he actively tried to escape.

Before the Pro Bowls, before the All-Pro selections and before becoming the highest-paid kicker in NFL history, Aubrey’s sporting ambitions lay elsewhere. Raised in Texas, he developed into one of the country’s most highly-rated youth soccer prospects and eventually starred at Notre Dame, helping the Fighting Irish reach the College Cup final. Major League Soccer followed. Toronto FC selected him in the first round of the 2017 MLS SuperDraft, but he only appeared for the reserve team before his rights were traded to Bethlehem Steel in the lower USL Championship.

The professional game, ultimately, proved less accommodating than college, and the dream that had occupied most of his young life slowly drifted away. By his mid-twenties, Aubrey had stepped away from the game altogether and entered the world of software sales and engineering, seemingly destined for a life far removed from professional sport. American football wasn’t Plan B. It wasn’t even on the list.

The leg strength displayed on the soccer pitch caught the attention of the USFL, however, and, in particular, that of the Birmingham Stallions, who selected him in the spring league’s inaugural draft. Without decades of kicking camps or specialist coaching behind him, Aubrey embraced a craft he had barely explored before and promptly established himself as one of the USFL’s best, and most accurate, kickers. His consistency helped the Stallions to back-to-back championships and, consequently, earned a tryout with the Cowboys, who had eschewed veteran options including Mason Crosby, Robbie Gould and the incumbent Brett Maher in favour of a head-to-head between Aubrey and Tristan Vizcaino.

LONG ROAD: Aubrey’s path to the NFL wound through the USFL (above) and MLS (below).

However, the player who now embraces expectation once feared it.

“That’s a big reason why I wasn’t successful as a soccer player,” Aubrey admits, “I tried to hide from moments like that every time I got on the ball.

The transformation from hesitant soccer player to one of football’s most reliable performers says as much about mentality as it does mechanics. Great kickers always speak about routine but, beneath the repetition, they must also learn not just to tolerate pressure, but to welcome it.

“Pressure is a privilege,” Aubrey says now. “That’s what every kicker has to tell themselves, so that you look forward to those moments instead of trying to hide from them.”

And, as Aubrey’s reputation has grown, so too have the expectations. Early in his career, he says a 60-yard attempt represented freedom, as nobody realistically expected success. Misses from that sort of distance carried little consequence, the reward outweighing the risk. Now, that has all changed.

“Early on in your career, when you’re going to a range where no-one really expects you to make it, that’s a really exciting opportunity,” he explains. “You’re like, ‘Here’s a chance to be a superhero’ — and, if you miss, it doesn’t really affect your psyche or the opinions of others.

“But now, going out there, they’re kind of extending that range out a little bit further from where you’re expected to make it, so I think the expectations kind of even that out for you. But I have those expectations of myself too, so it just makes me happy knowing that I performed well enough that other people now expect the same.”

In Dallas, the line keeps moving. Not because Aubrey demands it, but because those around him clearly have faith in his ability to convert. While he does not hold the NFL record for the longest converted field goal in an era where distances have been inching back — that accolade currently rests with Jacksonville's Cam Little — Aubrey welcomes the opportunity to test his limits.

"If they decide to push past that line, then you've already made the decision for them," he notes. "You're saying, 'Hey, this is where I was comfortable and you're pushing me past it'. So, now, if I miss, it's kind of on the decision maker as opposed to on the kicker, [but] my line has kind of drifted further and further back as we've gotten more comfortable."

> “
> **I'LL TAKE A KNEE AND JUST SIT THERE AND TRY AND FREE MY BRAIN OF ANY THOUGHTS — JUST KIND OF EXIST**

* * *

If Aubrey eventually came to see himself as a weapon, the first person to recognise it may have been John Fassel. Known universally in football circles as 'Bones', the former Cowboys' special teams coordinator has spent decades around elite specialists, and seen enough to recognise something exceptional.

Fresh from the USFL and still finding his footing in the NFL, Aubrey wasn't entirely aware of it yet. His focus remained simple. Survive. Win a roster spot. Prove he belonged.

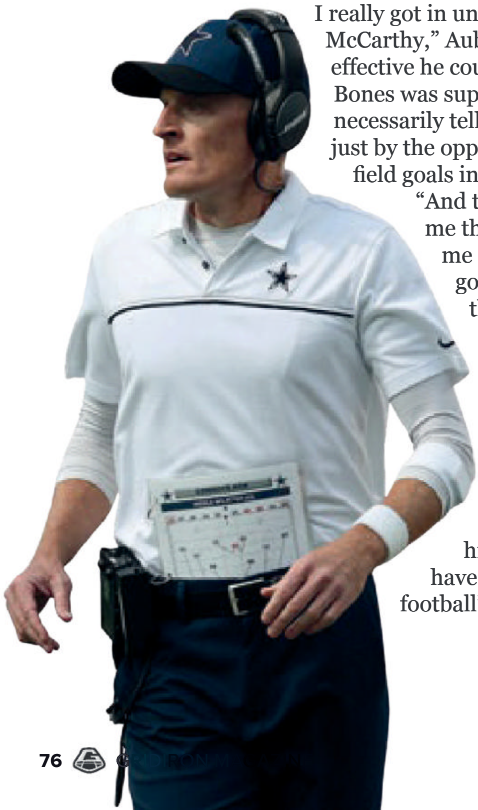
"I'm not sure I saw it differently," he recalls. "At the time, I was just trying to find my way through the world of kicking, land on an NFL team and get a roster spot. So I was just trying to do anything and everything I could to get that roster spot."

What he got was an opportunity.

"I don't think it was until I got to the Cowboys, where I really got in under Bones and [head coach Mike] McCarthy," Aubrey says of realising just how effective he could be. "Even in my rookie year, Bones was supremely confident in me. He didn't necessarily tell me right off the bat, but he told me, just by the opportunities he gave me to kick long field goals in games, that I was a special talent.

"And then, later on, he would actually tell me that. But the confidence that he had in me eventually allowed me to see myself going out there and making kicks that other NFL kickers aren't even attempting that consistently. I started to see the position, at that point, for what it's worth, and how I could differentiate myself and be an asset to the team."

Trust is one of the NFL's rarest currencies, and Aubrey received it before he fully believed in it himself. By giving it, John Fassel may have accelerated the evolution of one of football's most overlooked positions.



* * *

The life of an NFL kicker is often portrayed as solitary but, in reality, it is strangely ordinary. While the action continues on the field, Aubrey busies himself with smaller tasks. He helps the long snapper warm up, catching practice snaps. And waits.

"When we're on offense deep in our own territory, I'll help the long snapper get warmed up for his punt snaps," he says. "I'll catch a few balls."

Once that work is done, and the threat of clearing their own lines recedes, the kicker's mind becomes quiet. Only when Dallas moves into range does any ritual begin.

"I'll take a knee and just sit there and try and free my brain of any thoughts — just kind of exist," Aubrey reveals. "When we do get into kicking range, the punter will toss me the balls he's been putting into the net and I'll start warming my leg up. Once we get to third down, I'll put the ball down and walk to the sideline and start going through a little breathing exercise and talking to myself, pumping myself up, giving those positive affirmations."

There is no magic here, just repetition and breathing. And, eventually, the swing of a leg that millions have come to trust.

* * *

"It comes down to specialised training," former Packers favourite Mason Crosby once told ESPN. "When I first started kicking, it was just kind of line up, get in a spot you feel comfortable in, maybe watch what some of the guys did in the NFL or college. But, now, it's like golf.

"Everyone is a little bit different and you have to kind of own that, but guys are realising that they need to repeat the same thing every time. Take your steps back, your steps over and be in a position that is repeatable every time. You must feel comfortable that you're going to execute the kick."

One of the great misconceptions surrounding Aubrey's journey is that his success stems simply from a soccer background, as if kicking a football were merely a matter of transferring one sport to another. Aubrey himself sees it differently. Plenty of kickers grew up playing soccer. Many still do. What separated him from them wasn't necessarily the sport itself, but an obsession with the mechanics of striking a ball that stretched back to childhood.

"I'm not sure where the line is of how seriously they took it," he says. "Maybe it's just the level of commitment I had to training every day as a soccer player."

While other children dreamed of scoring goals, Aubrey devoted himself to understanding *how* they were scored.

"My favourite thing to do was to shoot and score goals," he smiles. "So, from the age of eight till I went off to college, I had a striking trainer who would just take me out to the field and I'd hit a bunch of volleys, set pieces, any sort of different finishing drills."

Thousands of repetitions followed across endless afternoons chasing a fuller understanding of contact, trajectory and technique. There is an irony in the leg that would eventually redefine what NFL coaches considered possible never actually being developed with football in mind, but while pursuing an entirely different dream.

LONG TOM: Hall of Fame-bound QB Tom Brady (above with ball) credits the likes of Aubrey with changing the game of football.

> “SOMETIMES HAVING MORE OPTIONS CAN BE HARDER FOR YOU

“I spent a lot of time figuring out the best way to strike a ball,” Aubrey explains. “And I think that, specifically, more so than just the soccer background, is probably what helped me most.”

* * *

Conventional wisdom says that having an elite kicker on the roster makes life easier for coaches but, again, Aubrey isn’t entirely convinced. The way he sees it, the further his range extends, the more decisions he creates for the men on the sideline and up in the booth. And, in football, extra determinations are not always welcome.

“I think it gives you more options from further out,” he tells *Gridiron*. “Not necessarily different options, but just opens them up earlier to you.”

In previous eras, fourth-and-medium from the wrong side of midfield produced a simple calculation: Punt or go for it?

Now there is a third possibility.

“I know it can, when you have more options, make things a little bit more difficult for your playcallers, as you have to consider more things,” Aubrey concedes. “So maybe, before, if we weren’t in field goal range, you’re like, ‘Okay, we need to either punt this or go for it’. But, now, he’s got punt, go for it *or kick a field goal*. Sometimes having more options can be harder for you.”

The irony, again, is delicious. For decades, coaches dreamed of expanding their possibilities, only for one of the game’s most gifted specialists to make them think harder than ever about what comes next.

* * *

When Aubrey signed with the Birmingham Stallions, football was offering him a second chance. But more than that, he says, it offered proof. Proof that not every player needs to arrive in the NFL via the traditional route.

“I think it was fairly unique,” Aubrey says of his own journey. “But we’re seeing the UFL being used as a testing ground for kickers.”

He speaks with obvious satisfaction when discussing those who have followed in his footsteps through the various iterations of spring league ball, from the USFL and XFL to today’s merger of the two, the United Football League.

“There’s currently four starting kickers on rosters that came through some version of the UFL,” Aubrey calculates, referring to Jake Bates (Lions), Harrison Mevis (Rams), Andre Szmyt (Browns) and Lucas Havrisik (Packers). “That’s a big pride point for me.”

For a position often judged with unforgiving simplicity, opportunities to show out matter as much as room to develop. As much as he believes his own path was unusual, Aubrey clearly hopes the system that enabled it survives. Tanner Brown of the title-winning Louisville Kings could be next in line after kicking multiple 60-yarders in the 2026 UFL season.

“I think that’s something that, as long as kickers continue to come out of there and prove that they’re capable, it’s a path that teams will keep looking at,” Brandon claims, albeit tempering his belief with a touch of realism. “I still think the best way to find a kicker is to watch a guy go four years in college and kick in some really pressure-filled situations to see what he’s made of. But spring football is still an option.”

* * *

Professional sport has a way of encouraging grand ambitions. Championships, records, legacies, contracts, milestones, Hall of Fame debates… Brandon Aubrey has achieved many of those already and, yet, when asked about the future, his answer contains none of them.

"The next goal for me, professionally, is just to make the next kick," he says. "And it's always going to be that way."

There are no promises beyond that, and certainly neither guarantees or assumptions, which feels strangely fitting for a player who came into the sport with little more than hope and eventually established himself as exactly that for his employer. Although Pittsburgh's Chris Boswell has been elevated to the same financial strata as Aubrey, the Dallas kicker knows that, to remain at the top of the tree, he needs to remain focused on the job at hand and not what others are doing.

"I think that, if you just keep making kicks in the NFL, good things will happen," he tells *Gridiron* as our lengthy chat winds down. "You can't really control anything outside of that. So that's going to be the goal for me."

Tom Brady spent more than two decades playing in a league where, to him, 52 yards represented the outer edge of possibility. Brandon Aubrey inhabits a different world, where his own personal comfort zone stretches towards 70. The boundaries of possibility remain invisible but, every season, seem to drift a little further out, and perhaps that's the most remarkable thing.

He isn't merely making longer kicks, but redefining where everyone else, on both sides of the ball, has to consider the implications.

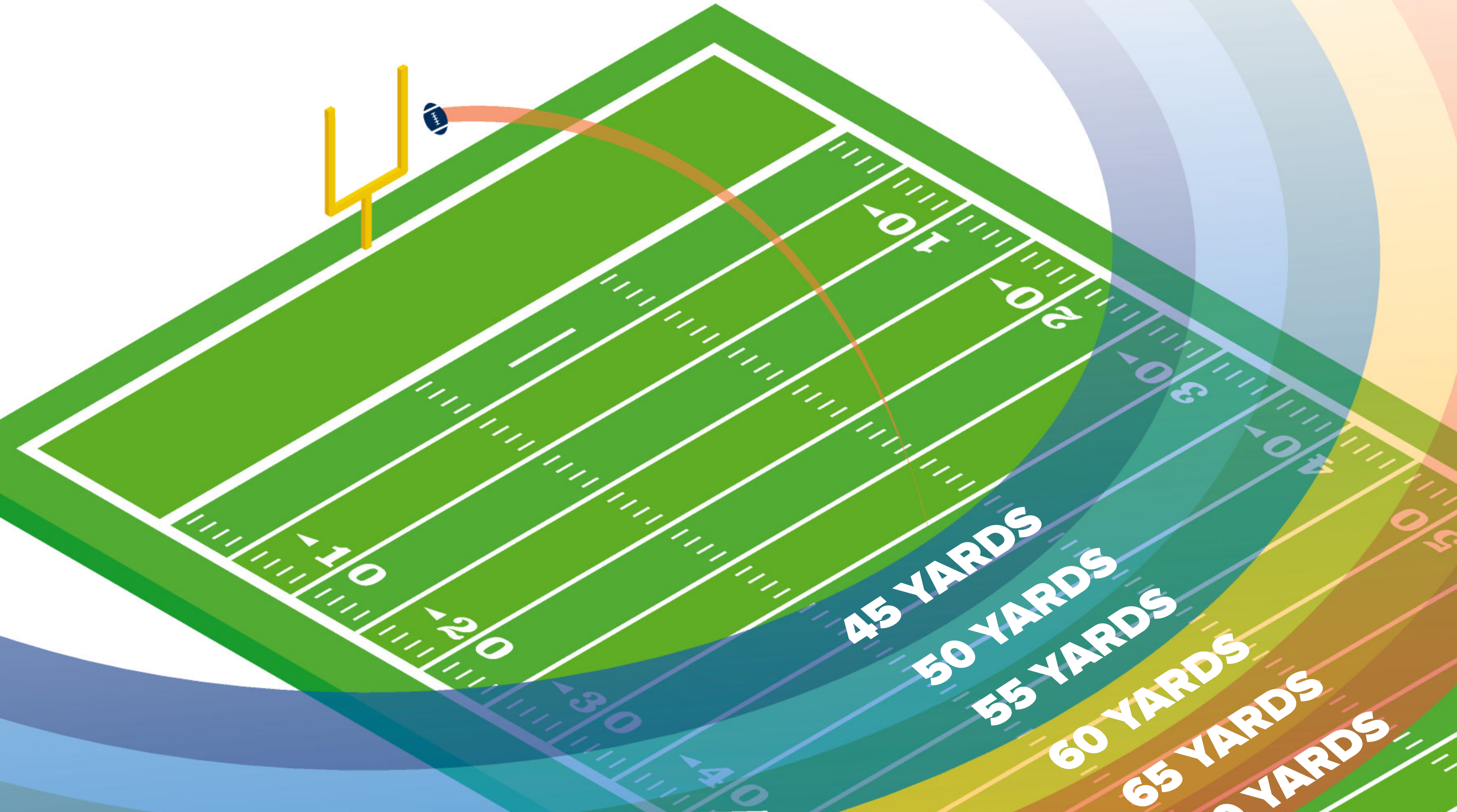
Brandon Aubrey still calls himself 'just a kicker'. The rest of the league appears increasingly unconvinced.

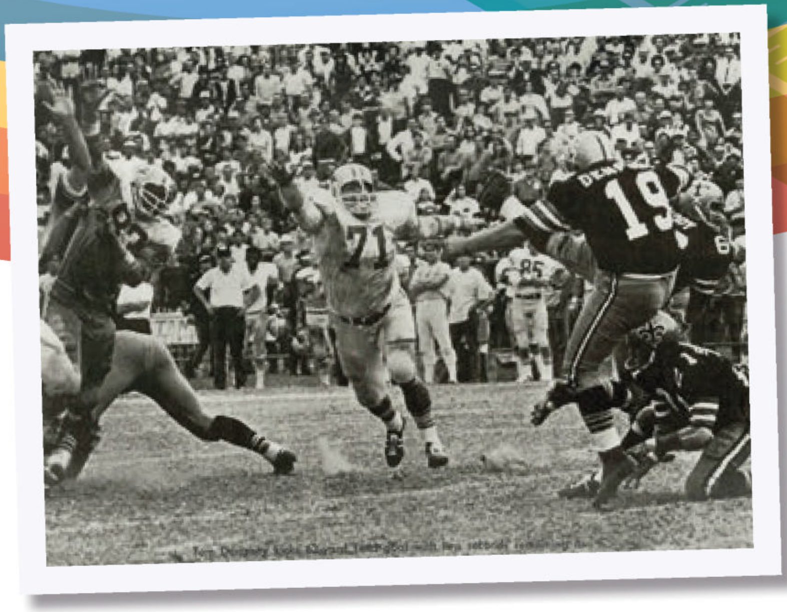
THE 60+ CLUB

60 yards	61 yards	62 yards	63 yards	64 yards	65 yards	66 yards	67 yards	68 yards
Steve Cox (CLE) 1984	**Jay Feely** (ARI) 2012	**Matt Bryant** (TBB) 2006	**Tom Dempsey** (NOS) 1970	**Matt Prater** (DEN) 2013	**Brandon Aubrey** (DAL) 2024	**Justin Tucker** (BAL) 2021	**Cam Little** (JAX) 2026	**Cam Little** (JAX) 2025
Morten Andersen (NOS) 1991	**Greg Zuerlein** (STL) 2015	**Stephen Gostkowski** (NEP) 2017	**Jason Elam** (DEN) 1998		**Chase McLaughlin** (TBB) 2025			
Rob Bironas (TEN) 2006	**Jake Elliott** (PHI) 2017	**Harrison Butker** (KCC) 2022	**Sebastian Janikowski** (OAK) 2011					
Dan Carpenter (MIA) 2010	**Jason Myers** (SEA) 2020	**Will Reichard** (MIN) 2025	**David Akers** (SF) 2012					
Chandler Catanzaro (ARI) 2016	**Ka'imi Fairbairn** (HOU) 2021		**Graham Gano** (CAR) 2018					
Wil Lutz (NOS) 2022	**Greg Joseph** (MIN) 2022		**Brett Maher** (DAL) 2019					
Chris Boswell (PIT) 2025	**Tyler Bass** (BUF) 2024		**Joey Slye** (NEP) 2024					
Blake Grupe (IND) 2025	**Lucas Havrisik** (GB) 2025		**Evan McPherson** (CIN) 2025					
Daniel Carlson (LVR) 2026								

THE EVOLUTION OF DISTANCE

How field goal range has extended beyond Tom Brady's 'line of demarcation'.


45 YARDS
50 YARDS
55 YARDS
60 YARDS
65 YARDS
70 YARDS
10
20
30
40
50



1970: Tom Dempsey kicks a 63-yard NFL record. The distance stands for 28 years and remains largely viewed as an anomaly rather than a new benchmark.

PHOTO: NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

ERA	COACH'S THINKING
1970s	45 yards is a good attempt
1980s	48-50 yards is acceptable
1990s	50+ becoming more common
2000s	52-55 enters mainstream thinking
2010s	Justin Tucker pushes comfort zone beyond 60
2020s	Aubrey and others normalise 60+

CHICAGO BEARS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
George McCaskey	Ryan Poles	Ben Johnson	Soldier Field	11-6 (lost in Divisional Round)

VERDICT Ben Johnson opened the curtain to let light through championship window; polishing required to shine completely.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★☆
OFFENSE:	★★★★☆
DEFENSE:	★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

The 2025 ‘Cardiac Bears’ proved that they can’t be counted out of any contest and are capable of taking any opponent to the wire. The offense was often electric and, with another full offseason to further bed in HC Ben Johnson’s scheme, the sky’s the limit.

THE CASE AGAINST

Defense wins championships but this is certainly not the ’85 Bears. A non-existent pass rush, which GM Ryan Poles has done little to address during the offseason, could see the Bears fighting for their lives in shootouts against a gauntlet of strong opponents.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Coby Bryant, S; Devin Bush, LB; Garrett Bradbury, C; Neville Gallimore, DT; Kalif Raymond, WR; Jedrick Wills, T; Kentavius Street, DT; Braxton Jones, T; Jaylon Jones, CB; Case Keenum, QB; Elijah Hicks, S; D’Marco Jackson, LB; Daniel Hardy, DE; Jordan McFadden, G;

OUT

Kevin Byard, S; Jaquan Brisker, S; Andrew Billings, DT; Devin Duvernay, WR; C.J. Gardner-Johnson, S; Nahshon Wright, CB; Olamide Zaccheaus, WR

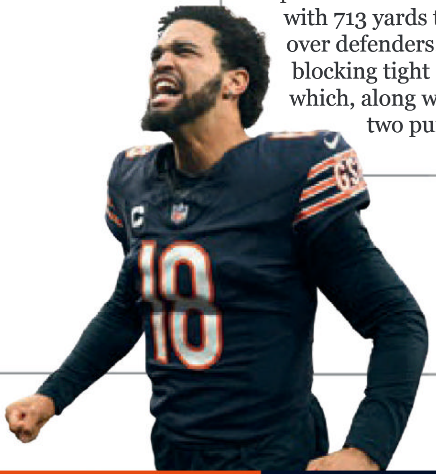
DRAFT

R1, P25	Dillon Thieneman, S
R2, P57	Logan Jones, C
R3, P69	Sam Roush, TE
R3, P89	Zavion Thomas, WR
R4, P124	Malik Muhammad, CB
R5, P166	Keyshaun Elliott, LB
R6, P213	Jordan van den Berg, DT

OFFENSE

The Bears’ offense in Ben Johnson’s first year was one of the most exhilarating to watch league-wide, and fans will hope it only gets better in 2026, despite D.J. Moore’s departure to Buffalo which leaves Rome Odunze and Luther Burden III to duke it out and become the *de facto* WR1. Odunze has been promising over his two years in Chicago, but has yet to live up to his full potential and may still be feeling the effects of the fracture in his foot suffered at the end of last season. Burden impressed in his five starts and will look to capitalise on being elevated to full-time starter.

One of the strongest TE rooms in the league features the three-headed monster of Colston Loveland, Cole Kmet and Sam Roush, the former enjoying a spectacular rookie season and establishing himself as Williams’ safety blanket with 713 yards through a combination of solid hands and the strength to run over defenders. Roush may not be a flashy addition, but was spectacular as a blocking tight end at Stanford and will likely be utilised in jumbo packages which, along with a strong O-line, will help to elevate the already solid one-two punch of DeAndre Swift and Kyle Monangai in the backfield.



KEY STAT

Caleb Williams passed for 3,942 yards in 2025, the most a Bears QB has ever thrown in a season — but still shy of 4,000-yard benchmark.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 28	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 22	WK 8. Nov 2	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	VS	VS	VS JETS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS

CEILING: *NFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME*

DEFENSE

Defensive backs coach Al Harris had the Bears' secondary operating at a league-leading level early on in the season, generating the much-needed turnovers that allowed the Bears' offense to keep up. That tailed off towards the back end of the year, leading to outcomes such as the disappointing loss to the 49ers that exposed the defense's deficiencies and ultimately led to Poles letting starting safeties Kevin Byard and Jaquan Brisker depart in free agency. The oft-criticised GM has arguably plugged that gap with upgrades in Pro Bowler and Super Bowl winner Cobe Bryant and promising rookie Dillon Thienemann, but question marks still remain over the health of cornerbacks Jaylon Johnson and Kyler Gordon.

The defensive front remains a glaring and largely unaddressed issue. The Bears ranked 31st and 29th in pass rush win rate and pressure percentage respectively in 2025, numbers that are nowhere near where they need to be to compete for championships. However, Poles seems comfortable enough to rely on Montez Sweat, Dayo Odeyingbo (who will be returning from an Achilles injury) and Austin Booker for 2026. Johnson, meanwhile, has emphasised the need for better coaching to improve the unit's output.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

15

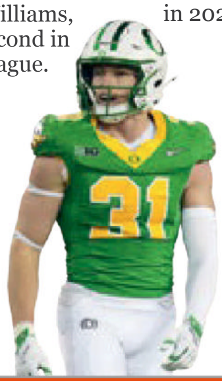
Number of years between most recent playoff wins for the Bears

28

Total 'big-time throws' from Caleb Williams, to sit second in the league.

6

Fourth quarter comebacks in 2025



GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

With the imposing strength of schedule and the Bears consistently struggling to get one over on division rivals, they will find it much tougher retaining the NFC North title than they did claiming it in 2025.

STAR MAN

CALEB WILLIAMS

QB

Williams demonstrated his knack for the spectacular, leading the league in big-time passes, many of which feature heavily in season highlights. He can hit his man from any platform, or sometimes no platform at all. Whilst he can be deadly from anywhere on the field however, Williams still needs to improve the consistency of his short and intermediate passes from within the pocket.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

LUTHER BURDEN III

WR

Burden looks to build upon a solid rookie campaign that opened with a spectacular long touchdown grab against Dallas. As WR3 last year, Burden was able to rack up 652 yards as he demonstrated quick, strong hands and a killer instinct needed to thrive in a tough NFC North. D.J. Moore's exit creates opportunity and HC Ben Johnson says he's buying Burden stock...

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥🔥🔥

TYRIQUE STEVENSON

CB

Stevenson has been a three-year starter in Chicago but had his worst season in 2025, allowing 15.4 yards per reception, which saw him benched towards the end of the campaign. Stevenson has a chance to redeem himself with a strong training camp, but the Bears' fourth round selection of Malik Muhammed out of Texas will be looming behind him.

WK 10.	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 26	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 19	WK 16. Dec 25	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
BYE	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	VS	AT

FLOOR: *WILDCARD ROUND DEFEAT*

DETROIT LIONS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Sheila Ford Hamp	Brad Holmes	Dan Campbell	Ford Field	9-8

VERDICT Changes aside, pride alone should see a resurgent Lions side return to the top of the pile.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★☆
OFFENSE:	★★★★☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★☆☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

The Lions have arguably the strongest roster in the division and recent history of success under a fiery head coach and behind a quietly good quarterback. If the offense bounces back as expected, and in spite of the Sonic & Knuckles split, then they could be unstoppable.

THE CASE AGAINST

The new offensive scheme under OC Drew Petzing may take time to bed in before production hits expected levels, and there is no David Montgomery to pair with Jahmyr Gibbs in the backfield. Health issues on defense may also hold the team back.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Isiah Pacheco, RB; Larry Borom, T; Tyler Conklin, TE; Roger McCreary, CB; D.J. Wonnum, DE; Payton Turner, DE; Damone Clark, LB; Juice Scruggs, G; Cade Mays, C; Christian Izien, S; Greg Dortch, WR; Teddy Bridgewater, QB; Ben Bartch, G; Chuck Clark, S; Jay Tufele, DT, Joe Bachie, LB

OUT

David Montgomery, RB; Taylor Decker, T; Graham Glasgow, C; Josh Paschall, DE; Dan Skipper, T

DRAFT

R1, P17	Blake Miller, T
R2, P44	Derrick Moore, DE
R4, P118	Jimmy Rolder, LB
R5, P157	Keith Abney II, CB
R5, P168	Kendrick Law, WR
R6, P205	Skyler Gill-Howard, DT
R7, P222	Tyre West, DL

OFFENSE

The Lions are installing a new offensive scheme under their latest coordinator Drew Petzing after John Morton was relived of playcalling duties and subsequently fired at the end of the 2025 season. Jared Goff continues to be the steady captain of the ship in a system that he is clearly comfortable with, leading the NFL in passing yards (13,768), TDs (101) and passing yards per game (270) since 2023. Goff will utilise one of the league's most dynamic receiving corps in Amon-Ra St.Brown, Jameson Williams and tight end Sam LaPorta, with second-year wideout Isaac TeSlaa only going to be a bigger part of the unit after a strong rookie year.

The Lions run game was inconsistent last year, especially in the second half of the season, and 2026 will see Jahmyr Gibbs take on the role of bell cow following the departure of running mate David Montgomery to Houston during free agency. Isiah Pacheco has arrived from Kansas City, but will be RB2 in an offense HC Dan Campbell has already said is the incumbent's. An effective run game will be crucial in supporting play-action that the Lions utilise so well.

WILLIAMS
1
DETROIT
14
GIBBS
0

KEY STAT

Despite a significant drop off in offensive output in 2025, the Lions still ranked fourth in the NFL with 28.3 points per game.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 17	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6.	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	BYE	VS	VS	AT

DEFENSE

Defensive coordinator Kelvin Sheppard returns for a second year with a scheme that heavily utilises nickel coverages. The Lions have some stars in their secondary, but two lynchpins of the unit are coming off of injury, as Brian Branch recovers from an Achilles tear and Kerby Joseph continues to rehab the knee that curtailed what appeared on course to be a stellar 2025 campaign. Christian Izien and Chuck Clark have been signed to provide cover in the interim, with veterans Avonte Maddox and Roger McCreary also coming in to bolster the cornerback corps.

Star pash rusher Aidan Hutchinson was relied on heavily last year, finding himself involved in 91 percent of all defensive snaps. His phenomenal output of 14.5 sacks was impressive coming off the broken leg he sustained in 2024, but the Lions are clearly cautious of their star burning out and have brought in DE support in the form of D.J. Wonnum and Payton Turner, as well as drafting Derrick Moore in the second round. Jack Campbell enjoyed a breakout year in 2025, and remains at linebacker alongside Derrick Barnes, Malcolm Rodriguez and free agent acquisition Damone Clark.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

176

Tackles by LB Jack Campbell, earning Pro-Bowl and All-Pro honours.

105.5

Jared Goff's passer rating for 2025.

38.7

Lions' third down conversion rate percentage.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

After a disappointing 2025 campaign that had some questioning whether their window had shut, expect the Lions to come back all guns blazing with a revitalised offense to reclaim the NFC North crown and make a deep playoff run.

STAR MAN

PENEI SEWELL

LT

Sewell is the unquestioned leader on the offensive line and was the highest graded offensive lineman in the league last season as he allow quarterback pressure on just 3.3 percent of plays. The Lions are switching Sewell from right to left tackle for 2026 and are confident that he has the skill set to adjust to protecting Goff's blindside.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

ISAAC TESLAA

WR

TeSlaa has proven himself to be a unique redzone threat, utilising his size to catch six touchdowns from 16 receptions as a rookie. Despite the names ahead of him on the depth chart, he will look to increase his targets from the 1.9 per game he received in 2025 in order to secure the WR3 role behind Amon-Ra St. Brown and Jameson Williams.

HEAT INDEX

GIOVANNI MANU

OT

The Lions had hoped that Manu would develop into an effective swing tackle but, come his third year with the team, it appears that they are preparing for the worst as they drafted Blake Miller in the first round, while veteran Larry Borom is expected to get the nod to start. As such, 2026 could see Manu playing for his place on the roster.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 26	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 28	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	VS	VS	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT

GREEN BAY
PACKERS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
The Fans	Brian Gutekunst	Matt LaFleur	Lambeau Field	9-7 (lost in Wildcard Round)

VERDICT

Always in the mix, but absences on both sides of the ball could derail their season.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★☆
OFFENSE:	★★★★☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★☆☆☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

The Packers are perennial contenders and know how to win, especially in the NFC North. Jordan Love is establishing himself as a top QB, and the receiving corps is more than useful. Oh, and a certain Micah Parsons should be back from injury by October.

THE CASE AGAINST

The defense is good, but not spectacular and will likely be missing some key pieces to start the season. The offense can be too conservative in key moments, which has led to criticism of the head coach as the Lambeau faithful crave another Lombardi.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Zaire Franklin, LB; Christian Watson, WR; Benjamin St-Juste, CB; Skyy Moore, WR; Javon Hargrave, DL; Tyrod Taylor, QB; M.J. Devonshire, CB; Marlon Jones, CB; Chris Brooks, RB; Brenton Cox Jr, LB; Jonathan Ford, NT; Darian Kinnaird, T; Bo Melton, WR/CB; Nick Niemann, LB; Kristian Welch, LB; Josh Whyte, TE; Sean Rhyan, C

OUT

Rashan Gary, DE; Elgton Jenkins, C; Colby Wooden, DT; Dontayvion Wicks, WR; Romeo Doubs, WR; Kingsley Enagbare, LB; Rasheed Walker, T; Quay Walker, LB; Malik Willis, QB; Emanuel Wilson, RB; Zayne Anderson, S; Nate Hobbs, CB; Brandon McManus, K

DRAFT

R2, P52	Brandon Cisse, CB
R3, P77	Chris McClellan, DT
R4, P120	Dani Dennis-Sutton, DE
R5, P153	Jager Burton, C
R6, P201	Domani Jackson, CB
R6, P216	Trey Smack, K

OFFENSE

The Packers utilise a run-heavy scheme that that goes as Josh Jacobs does. Although he has returned to team activities, we are yet to see the implications of his legal troubles. If he misses time, Green Bay will need to rely on Marshawn Lloyd, who has been plagued with injury issues since being drafted in 2024 and, behind him, Chris Brooks. Brooks recently signed a two-year contract due to his abilities as a pass-blocker, and is better in a situational role.

The ground game situation could, and maybe should, cause Matt LaFleur to lean more heavily on the passing game. Jordan Love continues to perform consistently well, threw only six interceptions in 2025 and recorded a QBR of 72.7, ranking him third behind only Drake Maye and Brock Purdy. However, he only amassed 3,381 passing yards, but that would increase if he's given more rein to sling it once in a while. Newly extended Christian Watson, who averaged 17 yards per catch last year, will be Love's main target but, after the departures of Romeo Doubs and Dontayvion Wicks, the Packers will hope that TE Tucker Kraft can return from injury, while FA Skyy Moore and Matthew Golden show improvement over 2025.

KEY STAT

The Packers have gone four seasons without a division title, their longest drought since the division changed from the NFC Central.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 24	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Oct 29	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	AT	VS	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS	AT

CEILING: *DIVISIONAL ROUND*

DEFENSE

The defense is good and was able to keep the Packers in games last season, but it needs to be better after only generating 14 takeaways. Cornerback Xavier McKinney continues to perform as one of the top safeties in the league and will be supported by rising star Evan Williams with Javon Bullard handling slot coverage duties, but Nate Hobbs' experience has left for San Francisco.

The unit will also be transitioning to a new 3-4 defensive scheme as erstwhile Arizona head coach Jonathan Gannon replaces the departed Jeff Hafley as DC. Where the defense will really need help is in the defensive front, with glaring holes left by the departure of Rashan Gary and the extended absence of game-wrecker Micah Parsons as he continues to rehab from his torn ACL and associated meniscus repair. The Packers have brought in Javon Hargrave and Zaire Franklin to provide a veteran presence in the front seven, added to the line depth with two of their first three draft picks, whilst hoping that the likes of Edgerrin Cooper and Lukas Van Ness will be able to make significant improvement and step up to fill some big shoes.

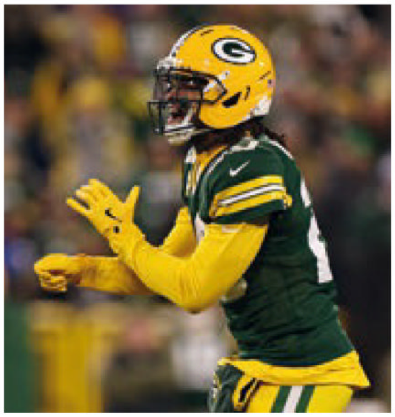
NUMBERS TO KNOW

27	12.5	6
The number of different players utilised on Green Bay's offense in 2025.	Micah Parsons' sack total before tearing his ACL.	Interceptions thrown by Jordan Love in 2025.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

The Packers will, in all likelihood, reach another postseason, but possibly as a third-place wildcard qualifier coming out of a stacked NFC North. However they get there, progress through the rounds will be demanded.

STAR MAN



XAVIER MCKINNEY

CB

If he were healthy, then Micah Parsons would likely feature here but, if he's not on the field, then he's not helping the team. McKinney is an elite talent and a consistent presence. In 2025, he recorded a more-than-impressive 82.4 run defense grade and allowed a 63.9 passer rating when the ball was thrown his way.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

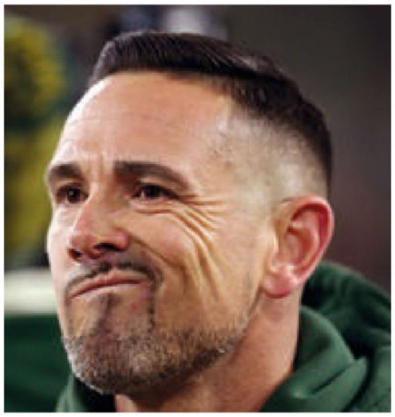
LUKAS VAN NESS

LB

Van Ness only appeared in nine games last season due to a foot injury, but will look to feature prominently in 2026, especially at the beginning of the season. The Packers have shown their belief in him by picking up the former first round pick's fifth-year option as Van Ness looks to surpass his career-high four sacks from his rookie season.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥🔥



MATT LAFLEUR

HC

It may seem strange to suggest a coach with a record like LaFleur's may be on the hot seat, but expectations are different in Titletown. The Packers haven't won an NFC North division crown since 2021 and, whilst they are perennial postseason participants, some feel that LaFleur is too conservative and lacks the killer instinct to push the team all the way. It may be getting to a point where it's Super Bowl or bust.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11.	WK 12. Nov 25	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 25	WK 17. Jan 4	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	BYE	AT	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS	VS

FLOOR: *MISS PLAYOFFS*

MINNESOTA VIKINGS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Mark, Leonard, Zygi & Jonathan Wilf	Nolan Teasley	Kevin O'Connell	U.S. Bank Stadium	9-8

VERDICT

Can turn fortunes around, but probably a year too early to truly compete for top spot in division.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★★★☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★☆☆
COACHING:	★★★★☆

THE CASE FOR

The 2024 season demonstrated what can be achieved by a competent QB in Kevin O'Connell's system. With significant offensive talent around him, new arrival Kyler Murray could take this team to the top. Justin Jefferson and Jordan Addison are top tier wideouts and there is strength and depth on defense.

THE CASE AGAINST

It takes time for a new QB in a new system to adjust and, when the other three teams in the division have established and successful quarterbacks, it'll be difficult to keep up out of the gate. Running back behind Aaron Jones is sketchy, and Jones is injury-prone. It may take some time for new GM Nolan Teasley to build a winning roster.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Kyler Murray, QB; Jauan Jennings, WR; Eric Wilson, LB; Ivan Pace Jr, LB; Carson Wentz, QB; Jalen Redmond, DL; Tavierre Thomas, S; Bo Richter, LB; Zavier Scott, RB; Andrew DePaola, LS; James Pierre, CB; Johnny Hekker, P; Ryan van Demark, OL; Eric Johnson, DL

OUT

Jonathan Allen, DL; Javon Hargrave, DL; Harrison Smith, S; Jalen Nailor, WR; Ty Chandler, RB; Justin Skule, T; Ryan Wright, P; Ben Sims, TE; Sincere McCormick, RB; Sione Takitaki, LB; C.J. Ham, FB; Ryan Kelly, C;

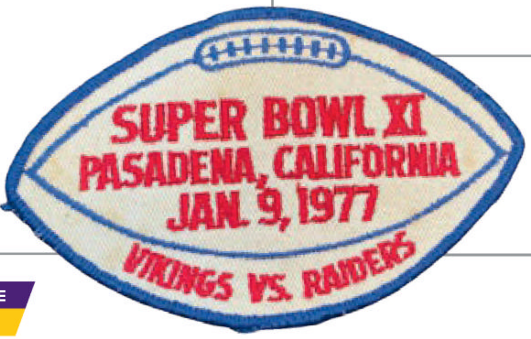
DRAFT

R1, P18	Caleb Banks, DL
R2, P51	Jake Golday, LB
R3, P82	Domonique Orange, DL
R3, P97	Caleb Tiernan, T
R3, P98	Jakobe Thomas, S
R5, P159	Max Bredeson, FB
R5, P163	Charles Demmings, CB
R6, P198	Demond Claiborne, RB
R7, P235	Gavin Gerhardt, C

OFFENSE

Kevin O'Connell runs a quarterback friendly system that results in high completion percentage but also explosive plays. O'Connell's scheme has seen recent success with Sam Darnold so it was a significant cause for concern when J.J. McCarthy struggled last season. O'Connell can't afford to be as friendly to his QBs if that is to be avoided this year but, with it being an almost foregone conclusion that Kyler Murray will take over as starter, an upturn in offensive production should be expected in 2026. If the former Arizona first overall pick can get comfortable quickly, and utilise the full array of weapons at his disposal including Justin Jefferson, Jordan Addison and free agent signing Jauan Jennings, then he will be sure to bounce back from the disappointing end to his Cardinals tenure that saw him start only five games last season due to injury.

The offensive line, an area of concern last season due to injuries that led to a heavy reliance on back-ups, will be stronger heading into 2026. The emergence of Blake Brandel as the future at centre and a healthy return of left tackle Christian Darrisaw will help ease the pressure on the new QB.



KEY STAT

The Vikings hold the highest winning percentage (.550, 537-438-11) of a team that has never won the Super Bowl.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6.	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 9
VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	BYE	VS	AT	VS

DEFENSE

To counterbalance the offensive struggles, the Vikings were able to lean on Brian Flores' aggressive, blitz-heavy defense that utilised a 'positionless' front seven and focused on lining players up in varying spots to get the best match-ups. Having ranked third league-wide in 2025, however, Flores will now need to develop a younger group of players after the departures of starting tackles Jonathan Allen and Javon Hargrave, as well as the loss of standout pass rusher Jonathan Greenard.

The Vikings addressed this exodus by investing heavily on the defensive side of the ball via the draft, selecting DT Caleb Banks in the first round. Banks has an extremely high potential upside, but comes carrying the weight of significant injury that saw him miss all but three games during his final season at Florida. Young players Levi Drake Rodriguez, Tyrion Ingram-Dawkins and Elijah Williams will need to step up until Banks can hit full speed. Meanwhile, inside linebackers Ivan Pace and Blake Cashman return veteran presence, as do Andrew van Ginkel and Dallas Turner on outside. While 'super safety' Harrison Smith's future hangs in the balance as he ponders retirement, Byron Murphy, Josh Metellus and Isaiah Rodgers lead a ball-hawking secondary.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

5

Winning streak to end the 2025 season.

6

Consecutive 1,000-yard seasons for WR Justin Jefferson (basically every one of his NFL seasons)

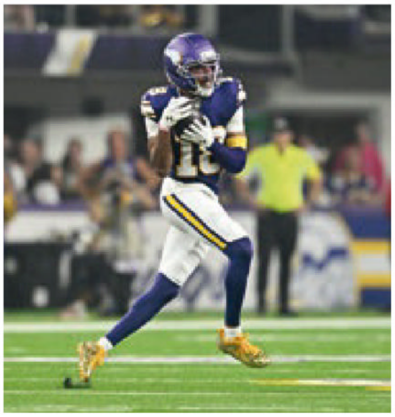
0

Pro Bowlers in 2025, the first time Minnesota was not represented since 2014.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

The Vikings will show significant improvement following a disappointing 2025 but, whilst they increase their win total, they'll still find themselves at the bottom of an ultra-competitive NFC North.

STAR MAN

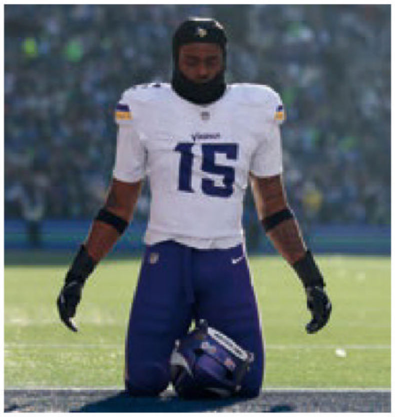


JUSTIN JEFFERSON

WR

Despite coming off a down season by his standards — in which he still racked up over 1,000 yards but notched only two touchdowns and dipped below a 14-yard average per catch for the first time due to the Vikes' woes under center — we can expect JJettas to be back to his usual self with a QB that can consistently get him the ball.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



DALLAS TURNER

LB

Turner was tipped as a breakout player last season, but didn't quite make the leap that was expected. With Jonathan Greenard being dealt in the offseason, however, Turner should now have the space to step into the lead role and fulfil expectations by building on the flashes of potential he showed last year.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥

KYLER MURRAY

QB

Murray has a lot to prove after being let go by the team that drafted him first overall in 2019. Landing with his boyhood team on a one-year deal, Murray is in the ideal situation to make a comeback but, if he falters, it could be the beginning of the end of his time as an NFL starter.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 10	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS

SUPER BOWL SAINTS?

Believing they possess the same ingredients that propelled Drake Maye and the New England Patriots to Super Bowl LX, the New Orleans Saints are hoping their own emerging quarterback can make a similar second-year leap.

CHRIS WINTERBURN
CONTRIBUTOR
𝕏 *@cmwinterburn*

Whilst the New England Patriots and Drake Maye surged to the Super Bowl in the quarterback's second year as a professional, the New Orleans Saints were licking their wounds.

A second successive losing record that made it five years since they last reached the postseason would be good reason for the mood to be low in Louisiana, but that was far from the case. Those who watched the Saints closely in 2025, especially in the second half of the campaign, knew something was steadily building. Something priceless in the NFL.

Momentum.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Tyler Shough and Kellen Moore had found a formula for success. It may have taken a while for Shough to be ready, but when the third-round rookie was named as the starter before New Orleans' ninth game of the season, there was a distinct shift in direction. The final nine games of the campaign featured Shough under center from the start — and his record in those outings was close to staggering, throwing for 2,384 yards, 10 touchdowns and only six interceptions. His QB rating across the Saints' final nine games was 91.3.

The stat-line doesn't read like a rookie feeling his way into life at the top, but closer to that of a seasoned professional coming off the back of an injury. Whilst some fans may wonder what could have been possible if Shough was named QB1 from the start, there is a sense that his learning period on the bench was invaluable to his development.

We've seen it with Patrick Mahomes, Aaron Rodgers and countless others. Rookie quarterbacks have the best success when they aren't rushed into the starting line-up. Whilst QB1 is a privileged position on the field, it's also the most challenging. The old 'sink-or-swim' adage is often used when debating giving young quarterbacks a chance in the NFL but, looking at some of the offensive lines on teams that regularly finish near the bottom of the standings, putting a rookie QB into that situation is almost akin to throwing someone into a pool with a lead weight strapped to their back.

Talent alone isn't enough, and they can drown before they've even realised they're in the water.

Shough's introduction, however, revolutionised the Saints' offense. Prior to Week 9, New Orleans were ranked 27th in total yards, 29th in points scored, 22nd in passing and 28th in rushing. The dismal return was compounded by the fact that they couldn't keep hold of the football, turning it over 12 times through Week 8.

By the time the season finished, New Orleans were ranked 10th in passing yards and seventh in pass completions. After starting the season 1-8, Shough was able to catapult the Saints to a 6-11 record, which included a brilliant four-win streak in December. It wasn't enough to save the 2025 season, but it set the table for what could be a monumental 2026.

* * *

SHOUGH
6
ORLEANS
SONY
SONY
NFL

SAINT ETIENNE: Free agent signing Travis Etienne Jr (above) boosts New Orleans' backfield as QB Tyler Shough looks to emulate Patriots peer Drake Maye (right).

Maye's blossoming in his second year with the Patriots can give Saints fans a lot to be excited about.

Some will suggest it was the introduction of a new offensive coaching staff arriving with Mike Vrabel that helped the 23-year-old, whereas others will look at Maye having settled into life as a pro and consequently being able to showcase his true talent.

Comparisons can often muddy the waters when analysing players and their progression but, in this case, it's worth taking a look at the numbers. Maye wasn't named as an immediate starter in New England, and sat behind journeyman veteran Jacoby Brissett until Week 6 of his 2024 rookie season.

From that juncture onwards, however, the North Carolina product was able to post a return of 2,276 passing yards, 15 passing touchdowns and 10 interceptions. His QB rating across his 12 games as a starter was 88.1. His pass completion percentage was only 66.6. In fewer starts, Shough had a better pass completion percentage (67.6 percent), fewer interceptions (6), a higher QB rating (91.3) and he threw for more yards (2,384). He also recorded five victories compared to Maye's three. Maye finished 2024 seventh in the Offensive Rookie of the Year vote; Shough was runner-up a year later.

Despite continuing to struggle in terms of results, Maye was widely praised for his performances in 2024, with Darren Hartwell of NBC Sports Boston anointing the rookie QB.

"Hear us out," Hartwell insisted in mid-October. "Yes, the Patriots were outclassed by the Texans in a 41-21 defeat, but the story of the game in New England was the play of rookie quarterback Drake Maye, who threw three touchdown passes in his first NFL start and showed real promise that he can be the team's franchise QB."

Similar themes appeared in the reporting of Shough's rookie performances, as Teresa M. Walker explained in a piece for the *Associated Press*.

"The New Orleans Saints may just have their quarterback of the future now with how Tyler Shough is playing for first-year coach Kellen Moore."

Anfernee Jennings spent six years with the Patriots and was a key part of how their Super Bowl roster was constructed. Jennings also saw first-hand just how Maye adapted to life in New England and then took the team to within one win of a championship. Having since signed with New Orleans, Jennings is eager to point towards the similarities in approach between his old quarterback and his new one.

"Seeing how Tyler works and how Drake worked coming off that first season, there are a lot of similarities there," Jennings explained in an interview with *Gridiron*. "They both work extremely hard. Tyler is here every day, and he competes. You see him building relationships with guys and just being that leader, ensuring he makes that jump from just being a rookie. He's been great."

> **"TYLER IS HERE EVERY DAY, AND HE COMPETES. YOU SEE HIM BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH GUYS AND JUST BEING THAT LEADER**

* * *

New Orleans invested heavily in the 2025 offseason, looking to give first-year head coach Moore the best chance to succeed. Many were sceptical about the quarterback room, especially when Moore's offensive scheme had almost exclusively worked with blue-chip players in Dallas, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, but, with any such concerns put to bed by Shough's emergence, there came a chance to focus on enhancing the rest of the roster ahead of the HC's second season

It's a lot easier to work in the offseason when you have a sense that things are moving in the right direction. Finishing the season so strongly lifted the mood in Louisiana and rebuilt confidence in a project where Moore is front and centre. The major focus heading into 2026 has been to surround Shough with pieces that can return the Saints offense to the levels it showed when Drew Brees was leading the charge.

Whilst impossible not to draw worrying conclusions about the contractual situation surrounding Alvin Kamara, the free agency signing of Travis Etienne Jr caught the eye. In his first four seasons in the NFL, Etienne recorded three 1,000-yard rushing seasons. Last year, he committed a single fumble in 280 carries, whilst his return of 1,107 rushing yards was the 11th best in the league.

There was an acceptance that Moore's offense needed an injection of unpredictability. Shough is the leader, but you can't go to him on every play. One of the best features of Moore's offense during his time as coordinator with the Cowboys was his ability to put forward an explosive, yet balanced offense. It didn't lean one way or the other, and there were seriously impressive returns from both Dak Prescott and Ezekiel Elliott, not to mention Tony Pollard, who was initially used as a secondary runner before making the Pro Bowl in 2022.

Having Etienne in the same running back room as Kamara is up there with the very best the league has to offer. By having two truly elite running backs playing on the same team, Moore should be able to ensure neither gets overworked, and the offense loses nothing when they have to switch out one for the other. Having nomadic third-year Audric Estimé provide a wildcard option on the depth chart makes the position even stronger.

That is a serious statement to make when you want to make a Super Bowl run, similar to the 2025 offseason when the New England Patriots signed Stefon Diggs to a three-year deal worth $69m. Whilst he didn't necessarily transform the offense, Diggs still went for 1,013 yards and had a 68.6 percent reception success rate.

However, this wasn't necessarily the point.

Making such a move in the offseason made others sit up and take the Patriots seriously. They weren't going to mess around and waste a year of Drake Maye's development. While the conservative advice would have been to bolster the O-line and keep Maye upright for 2026, letting him develop at his own pace, that didn't fit with Mike Vrabel's Patriots. They set a marker down with their offseason moves, which created a huge sense of confidence within the roster.

It's amazing how much a locker room of professional athletes can be boosted just by a stellar name coming in, and that's exactly what the Saints are hoping for by signing Travis Etienne Jr.

When asked whether he felt a similar vibe in practice with the Saints to what was palpable prior to the 2025 season in New England, Jennings was effusive in his excitement for the upcoming campaign.

"Being here and being able to see how they work, it's clear everyone's hungry. Last season obviously didn't go how [the Saints] wanted it to, but the team has made a lot of strides forward," Jennings explained to *Gridiron*. "We're looking to put the work in to hopefully win the division and go from there.

"I want to play good, winning football. That's why I'm here. My personal goals ultimately align with the team's goals — and that's winning the division, winning the conference and then getting to the Super Bowl and finishing the job."

* * *

The Saints didn't stop at Etienne, though. In the 2026 NFL Draft, they used the eighth overall selection to recruit arguably the best receiving prospect in the class, Jordyn Tyson.

Described in *Gridiron*'s Draft Preview issue as a 'super-talented receiver who can devastate from the inside or out with his route-running and big play ability', Tyson immediately adds quality just behind Chris Olave. If Tyson can stay healthy — which is, admittedly, a big 'if' — there will be two potentially elite options on either side for Shough.

It's no coincidence that, in Moore's first year as head coach, Olave recorded his most productive year at the Caesars Superdome, scoring nine receiving touchdowns and setting his own record for longest reception at 62 yards. Such is the explosive nature of a Kellen Moore offense — and having two receivers as talented as Olave and Tyson within that framework could be frighteningly productive.

There was even an offensive line move that could have seriously positive results for Shough, as Super Bowl-winning left guard David Edwards signed with the Saints on a four-year free agent deal worth $61m.

In 594 pass block snaps in 2025, Edwards allowed just four quick pressures of under 2.5 seconds. Only Joe Thuney and Quenton Nelson ranked higher in that metric, and both were All-Pro. Not only has Edwards produced exceptional play in his own right, but he has also played with two MVP quarterbacks in the form of Josh Allen and Matthew Stafford, so the Saints have ensured Shough will be protected by someone who has seen it all in the NFL.

* * *

It's not just on the offensive side of the ball where the Saints have looked to boost their chances of success. Defensively, some moves have been made too.

In 2025, the Saints ranked fourth in passing yards allowed and 10th in sacks but, while they were a really strong unit against the pass, that didn't translate to effective defense against the run, where they ranked 19th in yards allowed. Indeed, the Saints D faced the third-most rushing plays over the entire season, suggesting that opponents saw it as a serious weakness on their roster and tried to exploit it.

Hence the move to select Christen Miller out of Georgia with a second-round pick. The defensive tackle has a high ceiling, but can also immediately contribute to stopping the run. He has extremely strong hands and can build leverage over offensive linemen, and it's worth noting that *Pro Football Focus* gave him an 88.1 run-defense grade ahead of the draft.

The secondary also received some polishing. Martin Emerson Jr. arrives at cornerback, although it's not yet clear whether the former Cleveland Brown will feature as a starter. Emerson was coming off his best season as a

WANTING MOORE: Head coach Kellen Moore has tasted Super Bowl success (above), but now wants to do so on his own terms.

pro in terms of tackles, although there were only five pass defenses on his record in 2024, before being forced to miss the entirety of 2025 with an Achilles tear.

The Saints front office has added further depth and quality to a defensive roster that already included Chase Young and Cameron Jordan although, at the time of writing, the situation with Jordan is somewhat complicated. Officially, he is a free agent after not yet signing a new deal with the Saints but, crucially, he hasn't put pen to paper with any of the other 31 NFL franchises.

Jordan turned 36 in July, which has sparked speculation that he might wish to retire. New Orleans, meanwhile, have a contract offer still on the table for the veteran defender, although reports suggest that he wants a higher base salary. Experienced players can make all the difference in the NFL. Jordan has been voted to the Pro Bowl on eight occasions, and was part of the NFL's 2010s All-Decade Team. It's hard to envisage a scenario where he doesn't re-sign with the Saints, especially if they are positioned for a championship run, as this is exactly what he has been waiting for since being drafted by the team in 2011.

If Jordan elects to return in 2026, then the Saints will have a much-improved defense, although the departure of Demario Davis is inevitably going to hurt. It's near impossible to fix everything in one year, and the Saints have prioritised the biggest areas of need whilst, in truth, their weaknesses aren't too concerning. Are they big enough to make the difference in a tight game? Possibly, but their strengths are more than enough to push for a Super Bowl return.

* * *

Stretching back to his time with the Dallas Cowboys, Kellen Moore has been considered something of an offensive genius. His work as a coordinator left him in a strong position to take a head coaching job, although many suspected he was waiting for the opening to come up in Dallas.

That, ultimately, never came, and he spread his wings by moving to the Los Angeles Chargers to work with Justin Herbert, before moving sideways again to become offensive coordinator with the Philadelphia Eagles, winning the Super Bowl with Jalen Hurts under center.

> “
> YOU GET TO A POINT WHERE YOU FEEL LIKE THERE'S NOTHING MORE TO LEARN — UNTIL YOU STEP INTO A ROOM WITH COACH KELLEN

When Moore finally got his head coaching opportunity, the excitement was palpable, with the chance to see his offense in full flow amid the belief that the full Moore playbook may have been clipped by the HCs he worked under. While there hadn't been as much anticipation of a coordinator getting a top job since Kyle Shanahan left Atlanta for San Francisco, Moore's first year in Louisiana was all about setting foundations by implementing a style of football across both the offense and defense.

It didn't bring results immediately but, without a starting-calibre quarterback, that can often be the case. Once Shough took over from Spencer Rattler, everything seemed to click into place.

The Saints had left themselves too much to do to make the postseason, but there were very few teams better in the final six games of the campaign.

Talk of a Super Bowl run may have come out of nowhere to some, but this has been a calculated effort behind the scenes to put the Saints in a position to challenge, as Moore himself noted when reflecting on his first year in Louisiana.

“I've been looking forward to this offseason, just from the standpoint of stability and continuing to build,” he detailed to the New Orleans Saints media team. “These guys work really, really hard. They put a lot into it. Our guys stuck together through some tough challenges [in 2025].

“There's always something going on, which allows us to dig a little deeper into the previous season. What this time allows us to do is going to be very beneficial.”

* * *

Anfernee Jennings has an opportunity to make a fresh start for himself as a starter with the Saints, but there is a sense that he was recruited as much for his experience, know-how and desire as his talent. Having fallen just short of a ring with the Patriots last season, there is a hunger to get back to that point.

"It's like fuel — getting all the way to that point and just not finishing it… that adds a lot of fuel to the fire," Jennings admitted to *Gridiron*. "I'm about using that hunger, paying attention to the details, the little things.

"I'm trying to be that presence here; I want to encourage guys not to take even the smallest things for granted because it can bite you in the butt in the end."

Moore has been to the top of the mountain too, of course, but not as a head coach. The drive to return to the same peak but with a team entirely of his own is clear. Moore was clever enough to recognise he can't do things on his own. One of the criticisms of Sean Payton's time with the Saints was that he never put enough resources into building a defense. Offensively, the Saints were phenomenal under the current Denver HC, but they regularly fell short because of a lack of defensive structure.

That won't happen under Moore.

In a disappointing season with the Los Angeles Chargers in 2023, Moore worked under head coach Brandon Staley, but appreciated Staley's defensive mind and reversed their roles by hiring Staley as his defensive coordinator in New Orleans. Heading into their second season working together in Louisiana, it's clear the coaching blend is exciting the players.

Audric Estimé took his chance as a role player with the Saints in 2025, finishing the season with 198 rushing yards from just 46 carries. He credits Moore with handing him an opportunity and feels that the HC makes every player better.

"I feel like I learn something new every day with him, it's been amazing," Estime told *Gridiron*.

The Saints have been a perfect destination for players to get fresh starts over the years. Just look at Chase Young. And Moore is intent on creating an environment of improvement.

"I've been playing football all my life, and you get to a point where you feel like there's nothing more to learn — until you step into a room with Coach Kellen," Estimé continued.

* * *

There is a vacuum in the NFL at present. Many expect the Los Angeles Rams to be the real deal after trading for Myles Garrett, but there is uncertainty below that.

Kansas City will have to start the season without a fully healthy Patrick Mahomes, and there is no guarantee how he will come back from a devastating knee injury. The Philadelphia Eagles have lost players from their championship-winning roster of 2024, and the Seattle Seahawks have a target on their back as defending champions.

New England were so effective in 2025 because they did the basics well and relied on their talent. It was also talent that was developing with each passing week.

Tyler Shough has completed the initial phase, his rookie season. He now knows what football in the NFL is, and he knows he can stand up to that challenge. That's half the battle. Now we actually get to see his talent.

Many quarterbacks don't even get the chance to play in this position. Drake Maye did. He negotiated the difficult early stage and catapulted himself into superstardom in year two. Shough has shown even more than Maye had done after one season, and now many expect him to take a similar leap forward. He undoubtedly has the talent and, now, he has the supplementary pieces around him to make his life easier. There are playmakers wherever you look on the Saints' offense, the defense has been strengthened by the front office, so now he needs to take the next step on the field.

For all the Drake Maye comparisons, that's where the difference sits. Maye delivered in his sophomore year; we're waiting to see if Tyler Shough can do the same.

If he can, then the hype surrounding the New Orleans Saints is justified. This is a franchise that is positioned to challenge. They've had some hard years rebuilding, but this is the moment where a football team can start to reap the benefits of that work.

New England had the roster in place, the coaching staff in place, and the quarterback in place; then delivered. The 2026 New Orleans Saints have the same ingredients, only they will be aiming to go one better and bring another Vince Lombardi Trophy to The Big Easy.

CAM BACK: The return of stalwart Cam Jordan (left) and arrival of Anfernee Jennings (far left) will help the Saints defense in 2026.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Glazer Family	Jason Licht	Todd Bowles	Raymond James Stadium	8-9

VERDICT

Turbulent season beckons as Bucs look to rebound from 2025 amid loss of key players.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★★☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★☆☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★☆☆☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

Tampa Bay went into 2025 as the presumptive favourite in a weak division. While they have lost veteran pieces, they still have a host of talented operators in key positions. Emeka Egbuka can make the leap while Reuben Bain Jr is a highly-rated pass rusher that can build a fierce partnership with fourth-year standout Yaya Diaby.

THE CASE AGAINST

The loss of Lavonte David and Mike Evans points towards the Bucs' window as a premier force in the NFC being firmly closed. Baker Mayfield's contract situation will prove to be a distraction in training camp as the front office ponders investing $100m+ in an ageing signal caller with a history of shoulder issues.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

A'Shawn Robinson, DE; Alex Anzalone, LB; Jake Browning, QB; Kenneth Gainwell, RB; Justin Skule, OT; Rakeem Nunez-Roches, LB; Christian Rozeboom, LB; Chase Lucas, CB; Miles Killebrew, S; Sean Tucker, RB; Cade Otton, TE; Al-Quadin Muhammad, LB; Dan Feeny, G; Ko Kieft, TE; David Sills, WR; B.T. Potter, K; Scott Daly, LS;

OUT

Mike Evans, WR; Lavonte David, LB; Jamel Dean, DB; Haason Reddick, EDGE; Rachaad White, RB

DRAFT

R1, P15	Rueben Bain Jr, DE
R2, P46	Josiah Trotter, LB
R3, P84	Ted Hurst, WR
R4, P116	Keionte Scott, CB
R5, P155	DeMonte Capeheart, DB
R5, P160	Billy Schrauth, G
R6, P185	Bauer Sharp, TE

OFFENSE

Baker Mayfield's heroics in the first two months of the season covered up countless offensive ills. Granted, some of those issues were driven by injuries as, at times, the Bucs were without their three top wideouts, the offensive line was under constant restructuring throughout the season, and Bucky Irving's absence confirmed the run game among the league's very worst. Apart from the loss of franchise legend Mike Evans, along with functional RB Rachaad White, the personnel group remains largely the same, meaning Tristan Wirfs' ability to stay on the field will be essential for an up-and-down offensive line amongst the league's worst run-block units.

The offense's precipitous drop-off must surely ring alarm bells. Tampa Bay posted just 4.4 yards per play over their final seven games as they lost the ability to engineer chunk plays. The hiring of Zac Robinson, the former Los Angeles Rams pass game whizz who has experience with Mayfield, as offensive coordinator is a clear indication that the Bucs brass are focusing on re-tooling an offense that got more and more bogged down. The hope is some new ideas and a clean bill of health will be enough to re-energise a talented group that badly lost its mojo.

KEY STAT

Tampa Bay became the first team in NFL history to win their first four games with final minute scores, and the first team with four wins by three or fewer points in their first five games.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 8	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	VS	VS	VS	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT

CEILING: *PLAYOFF CONTENDER*

DEFENSE

Baker Mayfield's meteoric start to the season also covered up two other worrying trends for HC Todd Bowles: a leaky pass defense and a startling lack of rigidity in the red zone. The Bucs allowed opponents to score touchdowns on 70 percent of their trips inside the 20, while also giving up 254 passing yards per game; the fifth worst return in the league.

In that context, Jamel Dean's departure will be felt keenly. The all-action cornerback allowed the league's lowest passer rating (41.3) when targeted according to *NextGenStats*. His presumptive replacements in Zyon McCollum and Benjamin Morrison will have to make a notable step up, while Antione Winfield Jr's veteran presence at safety will be crucial in marshalling an inexperienced group. More output from the pass rush will be vital, with standout Yaya Diaby now joined on the edge by first round pick Rueben Bain Jr. David has been replaced by former Lions 'backer Alex Anzalone, a veteran off-ball player that has range in both the pass and rush games. Despite their woes in the air, the Bucs' rush defense remained stout, thanks in part to the space-eating exploits of Vita Vea and Calijah Kancey on the defensive line.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

28.5	18.6	9
Points per game in the first six weeks of the Buccaneers' 2025 season.	Point per game in the remaining 11 games.	Different starting Buccaneers offensive line combinations in 2025

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

A scrappy division should keep the Bucs within touching distance of a playoff berth but, with questions over their quarterback's long-term future, the absence of locker room stalwarts and a hefty turnover of coaching personnel, another tumultuous season at Raymond James Stadium beckons. If the Bucs fail to make the postseason, expect HC Bowles to walk the plank.

STAR MAN

TRISTAN WIRFS

OT

Wirfs has established himself as one of the league's premier tackles, becoming the first player in NFL history to win All-Pro plaudits on both the left and right side of the line. Effective in the pass and run game, his ability to stay on the field could be the difference maker in the Bucs' ability to rebound in 2026.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

JACOB PARRISH

DB

The combative second-year pro earned plaudits from the Tampa Bay coaching staff after a stellar rookie campaign. Operating as the nickel corner, he racked up 76 total tackles and two sacks, and was ranked as the 11th best corner against the run by *PFF*. Bowles is expected to give Parrish the chance to win a job on the boundary, demonstrating his versatility.

HEAT INDEX

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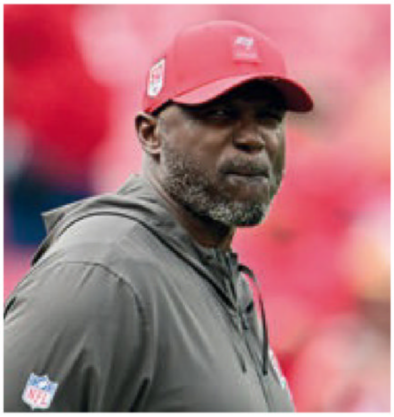


TODD BOWLES

HC

There is nowhere left to hide for Bowles. A slew of firings on both sides of the ball means this year is make-or-break for his tenure in Florida. The success of Liam Coen in Jacksonville has inevitably led to questions over whether the Bucs should have promoted their former offensive mastermind, who increasingly looks like the architect of the franchise's recent success.

WK 10.	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 30	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
BYE	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT

FLOOR: *MIDDLE OF THE ROAD*

ATLANTA FALCONS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Arthur Blank	Ian Cunningham	Kevin Stefanski	Mercedes-Benz Stadium	8-9

VERDICT

Hiring Kevin Stefanski and Ian Cunningham speaks of sea change, likely scuppered by cloudy quarterback situation.

QUARTERBACK:	★★☆☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★☆☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★☆☆☆☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

The Falcons still have a bevy of talent across the roster. A young pack of pass rushers pinned their ears back to great effect in 2025, and were backed up by one of the league's premier secondaries. In Bijan Robinson, Drake London and Kyle Pitts, the quality of skill players — if properly deployed — can devastate rival defenses.

THE CASE AGAINST

QB Michael Penix Jr. has faced an onslaught of injury problems, and shown little ability to access the deeper areas of the field. The solution? Bring in another much-maligned left-handed signal-caller with well-documented injury issues who was run out of town in Miami. Kevin Stefanski has one huge issue to remedy in the early days of his tenure.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Tua Tagovailoa, QB; Brian Robinson Jr, RB; Jahan Dotson, WR; Olamide Zaccaheaus, WR; Austin Hooper, TE; Jawaan Taylor, OT; Maason Smith, DT; Christian Harris, LB; Sydney Brown, S; Azeez Ojulari, LB; Samson Ebukam, LB; Chris Williams, DE; Jake Bailey, P; Nick Folk, K; Cameron Thomas, LB; Da'Shawn Hand, DE; Trevor Siemian, QB; Darnay Holmes, DB; Ross Blacklock, DT; Wanya Morris, T

OUT

Tyler Allgeier, RB; Kaden Elliss, LB; Darnell Mooney, WR; David Onyemata, DE; Kirk Cousins, QB; Kaleb McGary, T; Ruke Orhorhoro, DT; Trenton Gill, P

DRAFT

R2, P48	Avieon Terrell, CB
R3, P79	Zachariah Branch, WR
R4, P134	Kendal Daniels, LB
R6, P208	Anterio Thompson, DT
R6, P215	Harold Perkins Jr, LB
R7, P231	Ethan Onianwa, T

OFFENSE

Let's start with the positives. Bijan Robinson authored his best season as a pro in 2025, eclipsing 2,000 yards from scrimmage, earning First Team All-Pro honours and, along with the since-departed Tyler Allgeier, leading the franchise to become the sixth-best rush offense in 2025. Drake London has emerged as a genuine WR1 option, while Kyle Pitts reminded us, in fits and starts, why he entered the league to such fanfare. There is little turnover along an offensive line that boasts dependable operators in Chris Lindstrom and Jake Matthews, while Jawaan Taylor comes from Kansas City to slot in at right tackle.

All that said, this offense has one glaring question to answer. Who will start at quarterback? Michael Penix Jr returns from his third ACL injury at the age of 25, and has shown little indication that he is the long-term answer under center. Tua Tagavoila is currently second on the depth chart, but it's a real possibility he will be pencilled in to lead Kevin Stefanski's unit from Week 1. Can either man cure this offense's ills? The Falcons averaged just 20.8 points per game in 2025, and ranked 29th in third down efficiency.

KEY STAT

Recently appointed director of football, Matt Ryan set franchise records for career passing yards (59,735), attempts (8,003), completions (5,242), touchdowns (367), passer rating (94.6), completion percentage (65.5) and 300-yard games (73) during his Falcons playing career.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 24	WK 4. Oct 5	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	VS	VS	AT	VS

CEILING: *DIVISION WINNER*

DEFENSE

In an offseason of upheaval, Falcons fans will take solace in the knowledge that the defense remains largely intact, and coordinator Jeff Ulbrich returns despite the overhaul in team leadership. Atlanta's pass rush posted a record-breaking season, sacking opposing signal-callers 57 times fuelled by a pair of first round picks in James Pearce Jr and Jalon Walker. The defensive front is stacked, with Zach Harrison and Brandon Dorlus playing above their pedigree, while the trade addition of Maason Smith adds further ballast along the line, which will help as Pearce Jr's status heading into 2026 is in doubt following an allegation of domestic violence.

Smith's addition will also be crucial as, while the front excelled against the pass, rush defense was a weakness. The Falcons finished 27th in EPA per rush allowed — thanks in large part to a porous showing against the Colts and Jonathan Taylor in Berlin — and have lost veteran defenders in David Onyemata and Kaden Elliss. The secondary, by contrast, was one of the league's best in 2025. Xavier Watts and Jessie Bates III are a premier safety partnership, while second round pick Avieon Terrell will join Mike Hughes and older brother A.J. in at corner.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

333

Falcons offensive yards per game, the 13th best mark in the NFL in 2025.

20.8

Atlanta's points per game ranked 24th league-wide last season.

3-6

Michael Penix Jr's record as starter. Kirk Cousins went 5-3 as a Falcon.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

It's near-impossible to look past the quarterback situation as things stand in Atlanta. However, if a clear candidate emerges, this roster could be a real challenger for the NFC South crown in a division where none of the teams stand head-and-shoulders above the rest.

STAR MAN

BIJAN ROBINSON

RB

Now entering his fourth season, Robinson can credibly claim to be the NFL's premier offensive weapon. He logged a league-leading 2298 yards from scrimmage in 2025, and remains explosive and elusive in short spaces and able to run the full route tree from the backfield. A nightmare for opposing DCs, Robinson has a real shot at 1,000 yards rushing *and* receiving in 2026.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

JAKE MATTHEWS

OT

Entering his 12th season in the NFL, Matthews has established himself as one of the league's greatest 'Ironmen' by appearing in 195 straight games, anchoring Atlanta's offensive line and protecting a steady stream of starting quarterback blindsides to little fanfare. It must run in the family. Jake's father, the Hall-of-Famer Bruce Matthews, started 229 straight games between 1987 to 2001.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥🔥

KYLE PITTS

TE

Pitts entered the league as a generational talent, but failed to prove his credentials in securing a long-term extension and is now playing on a franchise tag. Last season was his best since his rookie term, but he will need to improve further to garner the lucrative second deal that would have been considered a near lock a few years ago.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11.	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	BYE	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	VS	AT

FLOOR: *DONE BY DECEMBER*

CAROLINA PANTHERS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
David Tepper	Dan Morgan	Dave Canales	Bank of America Stadium	8-9 (Lost in the Wildcard Round)

VERDICT Surprise division crown, emergence of Dave Canales provides hope, but first-placed schedule limits chance of repeat.

QUARTERBACK:	★★☆☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★☆☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★☆☆☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

Bryce Young marshalled an up-and-down side through some marquee wins at the tail-end of 2025. An agonising loss in the Wildcard Round against the Rams suggests this team can hang with the conference's best, while a wide-open division race again gives hope that nine wins could be enough to reach the postseason.

THE CASE AGAINST

A first-placed schedule could be a tricky hurdle to overcome for a young and incomplete roster. The Panthers face the third-hardest slate based on 2025 winning percentages. Bryce Young has shown glimpses of development, but it remains to be seen if he can replicate his form in the final months of 2025 across a full season.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Jaelan Phillips, EDGE; Devin Lloyd, LB; Luke Fortner, C; Rasheed Walker, T; Kenny Pickett, QB; A.J. Dillon, RB; Jalen Coker, WR; Sam Martin, P; J.J. Jansen, LS; Robert Rochell, WR; David Moore, WR; Isaiah Simmons, S; Stone Forsythe, T; John Metchie III, WR; Akayleb Evans, CB; Nick Scott, S; Feleipe Franks, TE; Will Grier, QB

OUT

Rico Dowdle, RB; Cade Mays, C; A'Shawn Robinson, DT; Andy Dalton, QB

DRAFT

R1, P19	Monroe Freeling, OT
R2, P49	Lee Hunter, DT
R3, P83	Chris Brazzell II, WR
R4, P129	Will Lee III, CB
R5, P144	Sam Hecht, C
R5, P151	Zakee Wheatley, S
R7, P227	Jackson Kuwatch, LB

OFFENSE

Despite a notable turnaround in the back-half of the 2025 season, the Panthers remained one of the league's least efficient units, finishing 30th in offensive DVOA. Much of their success came following a mid-career breakout by Rico Dowdle. The fifth-year running back went nuclear in October, rushing for 652 yards over a five-game stretch. Dowdle has now departed for Pittsburgh, giving space for Chuba Hubbard and the ill-fated Jonathan Brooks to lead the backfield.

Bryce Young's status as QB1 is now secure and, with the franchise exercising his fifth-year option, has two seasons to prove he is the future in the Queen City. The Panthers will need Young to help add more explosive plays to their offense, and third-round pick Chris Brazzell II could be the ingredient that takes the top off Canales' attack. The Tennessee alum led the SEC in yards per catch in 2025, and should prove an effective foil to the dependable hands of Tetairoa McMillan and Jalen Coker. Look for fifth-round pick Sam Hecht to push free agent signing Luke Fortner for snaps at center, while first-round pick Monroe Freeling should slide into one of the starting tackle spots.

KEY STAT

Eighth-overall draft pick Tetairoa McMillan was voted Offensive Rookie of the Year after posting 1,014 yards and seven touchdowns on 70 receptions in 2025.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5.	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Oct 29	WK 9. Nov 8
VS	AT	AT	VS	BYE	AT	VS	AT	VS

CEILING: *WILDCARD EXIT*

DEFENSE

The Panthers rebounded from a historically bad rush defense in 2024, where they allowed 179.8 yards per game and at least 200 yards in their last six contests. With a healthy Derrick Brown providing ballast in the centre of the line, the numbers improved to around the league average, and their run D should be further bolstered by the addition of Pro Bowl linebacker Devin Lloyd from Jacksonville in free agency.

Pass rusher Jaelan Phillips is another welcome addition. The ex-Dolphins and Eagles edge was one of the hottest prospects in free agency this summer, eventually landing in Charlotte on a four-year $120m deal. With just 30 sacks in 2025 (joint third worst in the NFL), Phillips' addition was a necessary move to help standout defensive coordinator Ejiro Eviro dial up the pressure. Eviro's unit finished in the middle of the pack against the pass, but that could largely be chalked up to the paltry pass rush rather than weak play in the secondary. Jaycee Horn is one of the league's premier cover corners, while Mike Jackson boasted a breakthrough season in 2025, ranking third in PFF's overall defensive grade for coverage players.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

.521	27	5
Win percentage recorded in 2025 by the Panthers 2026 opponents (10th hardest in the NFL).	Games missed by Jonathan Brooks since entering the league in 2024.	The 2025 Panthers were the fifth team to make the playoff with a losing record

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

Last season's 'success' has set the Panthers a tricky follow-up in 2026. With scheduled tilts against the NFC's divisional best as well as the whole of a robust AFC North may scupper hopes of a repeat title in the Queen City even if the NFC South remains lethargic.

STAR MAN

JAYCEE HORN
CB

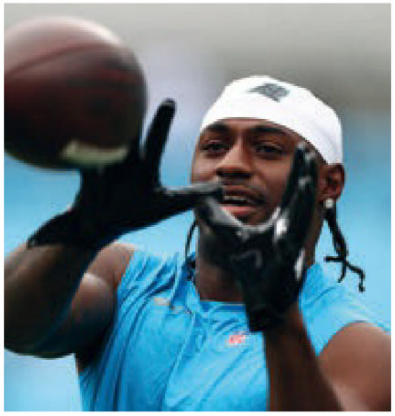
Horn's five picks in 2025 showcased an uncanny ability for statement plays, serving as a reminder of the undoubted talent that made him a first-round pick back in 2021. Injury issues plagued his early career, but with back-to-back healthy seasons under his belt, the two-time Pro Bowler has emerged as a cornerstone of this Panthers' defensive unit.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

NIC SCOURTON
LB

Despite meek sack returns as a team, rookie Scourton emerged as a potent pass rush force towards the end of 2025. After a slow start to the campaign, Scourton turned increased playing time down the stretch into a team-best five sacks, as well as seven tackles for loss. With Jaelan Phillips opposite, look for Scourton to push on in his sophomore season.

HEAT INDEX 🔥🔥🔥



XAVIER LEGETTE
WR

Entering his third season, Legette garners more headlines for his curious diet than his play on the field. The former first-round pick was the franchise's leading target-getter as a rookie, but dropped to third on the depth chart behind Tetairoa McMillan and Jalen Coker. With Chris Brazzell II joining the locker room, there is a genuine chance Legette drops out of the rotation.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 30	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS	VS

FLOOR: *TOO CLOSE TO CALL*

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Gayle Benson	Mickey Loomis	Kellen Moore	Caesars Superdome	6-11

VERDICT

Late season charge and canny offensive additions make Saints a dark horse playoff candidate in 2026.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★★☆☆
DEFENSE:	★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★☆☆☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

Rattling off four wins in their last five games gives the Big Easy a sense of optimism heading into the new term. A last-placed schedule, relatively soft competition in the division and the chance for Tyler Shough to make a leap give the Saints a real shot of going from 'worst to first'.

THE CASE AGAINST

There is a nagging sense that the late season heroics masked a lack of real talent across the roster. While key additions have been made to the offense, the franchise is still somewhat hamstrung by $114m in dead cap space from questionable front office decisions in the early 2020s.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

David Edwards, G; Travis Etienne Jr, RB; Noah Fant, TE; Kaden Elliss, LB; Afernee Jennings, LB; Tyree Wilson, LB; Martin Emerson Jr, LB; Terrell Burgess, S; Chris Rumph II, DL; Julian Blackmon, S; Ryan Wright, P; John Ridgeway III, DT; Dillon Radunz, OL; Ty Chandler, RB; Zach Wilson, QB; Terrell Burgess, S;

OUT

Cam Jordan, DE; Demario Davis, LB; Alontae Taylor, DB; Devin Neal, RB; Kendre Miller, RB; Kai Kroeger, P; Elijah Cooks, WR; Evan Hull, RB; Samori Toure, WR

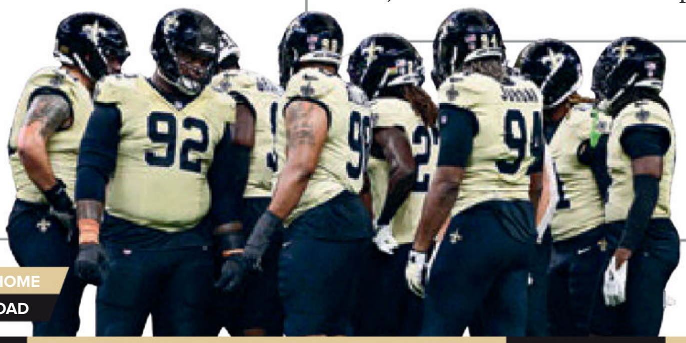
DRAFT

R1, P8	Jordyn Tyson, WR
R2, P42	Christen Miller, DT
R3, P73	Oscar Delp, TE
R4, P132	Jeremiah Wright, G
R4, P136	Bryce Lance, WR
R5, P172	Lorenzo Styles Jr, S
R6, P190	Barion Brown, WR
R7, P219	T.J. Hall, CB

OFFENSE

The Saints' offensive explosion in the latter half of the 2025 season was genuinely impressive. Since QB Tyler Shough's promotion to starter in Week 9, New Orleans went 5-4, adding six points and 75 yards per game to their output. Most impressively, the rookie was incredibly clutch, boasting a 103.3 passer rating on third downs, while showing above-average athleticism to keep the chains moving with his legs.

Despite their improvement, the Saints could still only finish 28th in offensive DVOA, leading GM Mickey Loomis to add further tools to the unit to keep up momentum. Free agent signing Travis Etienne Jr adds extra pass-catching savvy to a backfield that still features Alvin Kamara, while eighth-overall pick Jordyn Tyson freshens up a pass-catching unit, reducing reliance on Chris Olave given his patchy injury history. David Edwards is a reliable addition to the interior of an offensive line that under-performed against expectation last term. Despite including three first-round selections, a banged-up unit ranked 29th in pass-block win rate in 2025. If Shough and HC Kellen Moore are to make the leap this term, the O-line will need to live up to their pedigree.



KEY STAT

The 2025 Saints trailed by a total of 93 points after the first quarter, the most by any team this century.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 5	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8.	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	AT	VS	VS	VS	AT	VS	BYE	VS

CEILING: *WILDCARD WEEKEND*

DEFENSE

With an offensive-minded coach, and a shiny new toy at quarterback, the defense's role in New Orleans' mid-season turnaround has been largely overlooked. However, from Week 10 onwards, Brandon Staley's unit was the eighth best in the league according to DVOA, a marked improvement on their 21st ranking in the first half of 2025.

That said, the Saints enter the season without a foundational cornerstone as five-time All-Pro middle linebacker Demario Davis, who led the team in tackles, has returned to the New York Jets. Meanwhile, timeless sackman Cam Jordan — 10.5 takedowns and 15 TfL — had, seemingly, hung up his cleats before a last-minute change of heart. Rather than replace losses with big names, the Saints have opted to recruit middling free agent talent. Kaden Elliss' return from divisional rival Atlanta answers the question of who will replace Davis, but there is a dearth of standout pass rushing talent and the defensive backs are among the lowest-paid in the NFL. Staley's ability to scheme up pressure with a rotating bevvy of outside rushers, and the emergence of Kool-Aid McKinstry on the boundary, however, saw the Saints hold opposing offenses to just 179 passing yards per game in 2025, but will need to repeat the same magic this campaign.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

.473

Saints' 2026 opponents win rate in 2025 (second lowest in the league).

0

Saints offensive snaps taken with a lead in the first month of the 2025 season

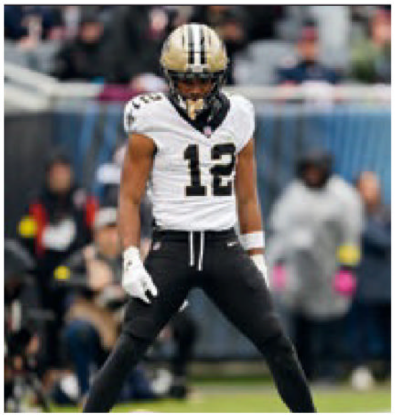
66.7

Tyler Shough's completion rate percentage on third down in 2025 (second highest in 2025)

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

On the basis that Tyler Shough and Kellen Moore will continue to develop their chemistry, to the point where they pull a deep roster without marquee talent through a weak division, the Saints can become the latest franchise to capitalise on a last-placed schedule.

STAR MAN



CHRIS OLAVE

WR

After a spate of concussions raised questions over his longevity, Olave returned to the field in 2025 with a renewed vibrancy. The fourth year pro returned career bests in catches (100), yards (1,163), and touchdowns (9) and, crucially, missed just one game. With Jordyn Tyson opposite him, the Saints have the makings of a devastating wideout tandem.

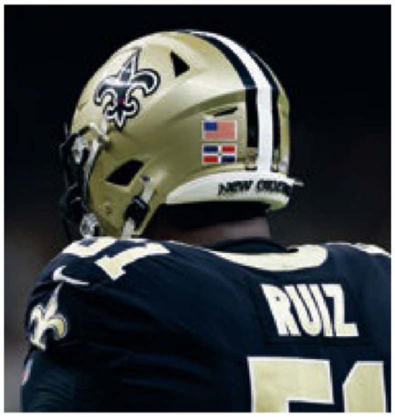
BREAKOUT PLAYER

KELVIN BANKS JR

T

Banks showed flashes of the potential that made him the ninth overall pick in 2025, combining brutal power in the run game with solid fundamentals as a pass blocker. Some lapses in concentration were punished by the elite pass rushers and, this term, he faces Aidan Hutchinson, Maxx Crosby and Myles Garrett. No better time to prove he is an All-Pro talent.

HEAT INDEX 🔥🔥🔥



CESAR RUIZ

G

Ruiz has been a weak point along the offensive line and, with David Edwards' acquisition locking up one of the spots either side of center, the veteran guard could find competition for his job from fourth-round pick Jeremiah Wright. Unlike Ruiz, the Auburn alum is a punishing run blocker, while the veteran also remains an inconsistent pass protector.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS

FLOOR: *MID-DIVISION FINISH*

NO TIME TO REST

Christian McCaffrey's unique talents make him indispensable but, entering his tenth NFL campaign, can the 49ers protect him enough to keep their Super Bowl window ajar?

NICHOLAS MCGEE

CONTRIBUTOR

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Christian McCaffrey celebrated his 30th birthday on June 7th, reaching a milestone running backs have been given understandable reason to fear. NFL careers are short, but they are viewed as especially brief for tailbacks and, given the workload he has amassed during a career that will surely end in Canton, there will plenty expecting McCaffrey to hit 'the cliff' in the not too distant future.

For the fortunes of a San Francisco 49ers team once again viewed as one of the top contenders to represent the NFC in the Super Bowl, however, it is imperative that he avoids the decline anticipated of backs of his age.

McCaffrey is the archetypal modern running back, a devastating three-down playmaker who, when at his best, can be the bell cow of the ground game, while also providing remarkable upside as a pass-catcher and consistently excelling in pass protection.

It is McCaffrey's abilities as a receiver that have proven most pivotal to the 49ers offense since San Francisco's blockbuster trade with the Carolina Panthers in October 2022, his prowess for catching passes out of the backfield and being able to thrive when lined up in the formation as a receiver serving as a cheat code that has maximised the efficiency of an attack that already had one of the highest floors in football prior to his arrival.

Only once since McCaffrey joined the 49ers have they finished outside the top 10 in Expected Points Added per play. That incidence came in 2024, when McCaffrey missed the majority of the season due to bilateral Achilles tendinitis and the offense ranked 11th in EPA per play in a 6-11 campaign. For the record,San Francisco was fourth in EPA per play in 2022, first in 2023 and sixth last season.

McCaffrey's skills as a receiver have served as an unfair advantage for a 49ers offense that already had the man with the answers to the test in head coach and playcaller Kyle Shanahan. Quarterbacks from Jimmy Garoppolo to Brock Purdy and, when the latter was injured last season, Mac Jones have been able to lean on McCaffrey to consistently keep the chains moving by turning short throws into double-digit gains. His efforts in that regard saw McCaffrey fall just 76 yards shy of becoming the first man to record two seasons with 1,000 rushing yards and 1,000 receiving yards in 2025, having previously achieved the feat with the Panthers in a phenomenal 2019 campaign.

McCaffrey ended 2025 with 1,202 rushing yards and 924 receiving yards, while finding the end zone 17 times in the regular season. It was another season of seriously impressive stats for the undisputed focal point of the 49ers offense, but the usual efficiency was lacking from a run game perspective.

SALUTE
TO SERVICE

It was a slog for San Francisco on the ground last year, with McCaffrey averaging just 3.9 yards per rush. He averaged 2.3 yards before contact per attempt — below the league average of 2.5 — and 1.5 yards after it. In other words, the 49ers struggled to keep defenders away from McCaffrey and he struggled to evade or bounce off attempted tackles. Yet, unsurprisingly for an offense coordinated by Shanahan, they showed steadfast commitment to the run, handing it off to McCaffrey 311 times as he racked up a league-leading 413 touches.

Thirty years old and with that level of mileage added to his clock last year, the prospect of the 49ers again having their offense go through McCaffrey in 2026 raises obvious questions about his ability to avoid the cliff as he heads into Year 10. Yet neither McCaffrey nor the 49ers seem daunted by that prospect, with a team that has made no secret of its desire to have a younger overall roster primarily tying their fortunes to an ageing core around which potential durability concerns abound.

* * *

McCaffrey's sense of calm regarding his mammoth workload is connected to his mindset. The 2023 Offensive Player of the Year approaches each season expecting to play every snap and trains with that idea in mind. As such, McCaffrey does not see playing 83 percent of the offensive snaps — as he did last year — as an issue.

"I've been dealing with those questions for nine years," McCaffrey told reporters back in May. "I think the workload in our sport is really monitored in practice, not in games.

"We play 17 regular season games a year and everybody's livelihoods are on the line. I would say, on Sunday, you've got to do whatever it takes to win and that's not a coach's job. You don't tell the three-point shooter you only get six threes today.

"So much of it is rhythmic and it's my job to put my body in the best position I can to go out there and play and I think everything else can be monitored during the week, or with a practice schedule, or certain ways you train, whatever it may be. But, when it comes to game days, I like to think you prepare yourself for playing every snap."

That kind of approach to the craft is what often sets great players like McCaffrey apart from the rest. Still, while nobody could doubt the commitment to putting his body in the best position to withstand the punishment it takes, McCaffrey's confidence in being ready to once again take on such a significant amount of touches could be viewed as naivety.

Though he has held up remarkably well over the course of his career as a do-it-all back for both the Panthers and 49ers, the Stanford product has also endured three seasons in which injuries have limited him to single-digit games, the most recent being the 2024 campaign that saw San Francisco suffer a nightmare Super Bowl hangover as a host of key players went down hurt. And, as McCaffrey puts more tread on the tyres, logic says the risk of him suffering another injury that keeps him on the sideline goes up. Yet the 49ers have little in terms of an insurance policy against that possibility.

Last year, the franchise had a solid back-up play following an offseason trade for Brian Robinson Jr who, despite being used sparingly, was able to spell McCaffrey effectively when he did see the field. Robinson's decisive, downhill style of running meshed well with the 49er offense but, with the former Washington Commanders back providing little in terms of passing-game upside, he was not brought back this offseason. Instead, the 49ers continued what has become a draft tradition by — in the eyes of many — reaching for a running back in the third round.

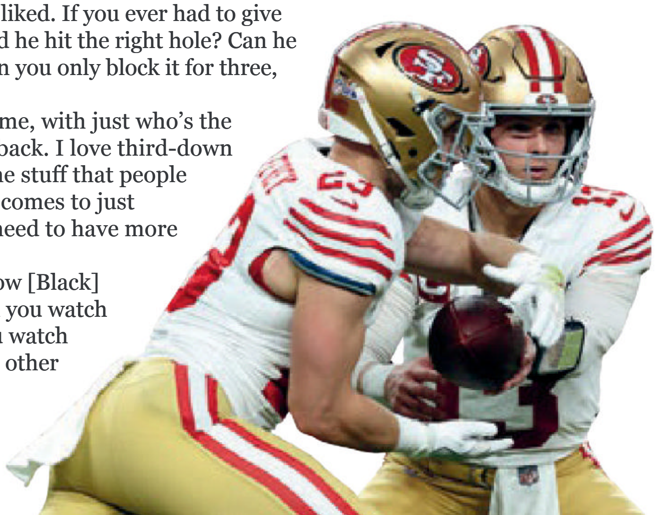
> "IT'S MY JOB TO PUT MY BODY IN THE BEST POSITION I CAN TO GO OUT THERE AND PLAY

Few had Indiana's Kaelon Black going that high, but he now appears primed for a training camp battle with 2025 fifth-round pick Jordan James for the right to be McCaffrey's primary relief. With Robinson in the fold, James did not register a carry as a rookie until San Francisco's Divisional Round loss to the Seattle Seahawks. Meanwhile, Black caught just eight passes across two seasons at Indiana, following his transfer from James Madison, but, having impressed in passing game drills at the Senior Bowl, Shanahan clearly believes he has the potential to develop into an asset in that area.

"We've gone through four [running backs in a season] a number of times," the head coach pointed out after the draft. "So what [Black] could do as a true starting running back is what I liked. If you ever had to give him more carries, could he hit the right hole? Can he move the chains? When you only block it for three, can he get five?

"It always starts, for me, with just who's the most natural running back. I love third-down backs, all the pass game stuff that people can bring, but when it comes to just running the ball, you need to have more than one starter.

"[Indiana] didn't throw [Black] the ball a lot but, when you watch his Senior Bowl, or you watch the older tape from his other



MAC THE KNIFE: Both HC Kyle Shanahan (above) and QB Brock Purdy (below) know the 49ers offense runs best through McCaffrey.

school, you see that he has that skillset that you can really develop — and you got a guy you can win with."

Indeed, there were promising signs early in Black's collegiate career in terms of his receiving ability, as he averaged 9.8 yards per reception and caught six touchdown passes in his two seasons at James Madison. Yet, noting that Black wasn't invited to the NFL Scouting Combine, it's difficult to have much confidence in a back-up rookie tailback's abilities on passing downs based off a couple of practices at the Senior Bowl. The cold, hard reality for the 49ers is that it is near impossible to have significant faith in any of their current options being convincing back-ups who can help McCaffrey preserve his body throughout what is sure to be another bruising campaign.

Beyond Black and James, the Niners have Isaac Guerendo and Patrick Taylor Jr on their depth chart. The latter spent last season on injured reserve after bouncing on and off the roster in 2024, while Guerendo did not register a single carry in 2025 following a promising rookie year that saw him score four touchdowns in relief of the injured McCaffrey.

As such, it is tough to escape the notion that 2026 will be another season in which the respite for McCaffrey will be minimal. That might clearly be the way McCaffrey wants it, but the 49ers still need to find ways to mitigate the physical toll of his extensive time on the field. Instead of his inexperienced back-ups, the burden in that sense will fall on the other members of an offense that head into the season with their own injury-related question marks.

* * *

Kyle Shanahan does not need any invitation to invest in passing game weapons during the offseason. The 49ers' commitment to adding to the wide receiver position has been more extreme than their dedication to adding talent at running back since he and John Lynch took over as head coach and GM in 2017, yet the franchise was left with little option but to invest at wideout once again this year.

The utterly bizarre breakdown in relations with Brandon Aiyuk and his bemusing willingness to surrender previously guaranteed salary to force an exit from the team has robbed the 49ers of an X receiver who fitted the offense perfectly. Aiyuk's self-imposed exile — which will continue regardless of whether the 49ers find a trade partner — combined with the departure of Jauan Jennings in free agency and an injury-hindered sophomore season for 2024 first-round pick Ricky Pearsall made reinforcement at receiver a must for San Francisco.

In short, the 49ers needed sure things at wideout. Instead, they plunged their resources into players who come with clear question marks, starting with marquee free agent signing Mike Evans.

Putting health to one side, Evans is as close to a sure thing as you can find at receiver. He is a ball-dominant X destined for Canton after starting his career with 11 successive 1,000-yard campaigns. Should he stay healthy, the former Tampa Bay Buccaneer figures to be a dream target for Purdy, one who doesn't need the benefit of significant separation, who can win at all three levels and can quickly become a tremendous asset in the red zone. Yet, after his 1,000-yard streak was broken by an injury-riddled final season in Tampa, the 49ers' decision to make Evans, who will be 33 by the time the

Home
San Fra

BETTING ON BLACK: Indiana running back Kaelon Black (below) is the latest rookie pick to shadow McCaffrey.

season starts, their number one wideout is a risky one.

Indeed, the team's fortunes on offense are, beyond the quarterback play of Purdy, primarily tied to three players. McCaffrey, Evans and tight end George Kittle, with the latter remaining pivotal to San Francisco's passing game and their ability to make any strides running the football. All three are in their thirties, and all come with injury concerns, as Kittle is pushing to be ready in time for the Niners' Week 1 clash with the Los Angeles Rams in Melbourne after tearing his Achilles in the Wild Card Round win over the Philadelphia Eagles in January.

The case can be made that, with the 49ers taking such a gamble on veterans, their offense is a house of cards only a couple of blows away from collapse. At the same time, with the signing of Evans and the other eyebrow-raising moves they made at receiver, it doesn't take much squinting to understand the thought process regarding their wideouts and how it could help keep McCaffrey relatively fresh.

> “
>
> **DON'T CARE WHO IT IS. YOU CAN'T JUST COVER HIM 1-ON-1**

* * *

Alongside his command of the offense, the speed with which he processes, and his ability to make second-reaction plays, one of Brock Purdy's key strengths is his willingness to be aggressive and push the ball downfield.

Albeit across a smaller sample size than most other starting quarterbacks as he was limited to nine regular season games because of his own injury concerns, Purdy led the league in completion percentage on throws of 20 yards or more last season (min. 25 attempts), completing 60 percent of his attempts (18/30). Per *Pro Football Focus*, he was second in yards per attempt (17.1) on those throws, but his quarterback rating on deep passes was 97.9, up from 2024 (93.3), but still way down on the Super Bowl season of 2023, when Purdy completed 63.8 percent of his deep passes (30/47) and had a quarterback rating of 138.1 on those attempts.

Eleven of Purdy's throws of 20-plus yards in 2023 went for touchdowns, a tally tied for the league high with Jacksonville's Trevor Lawrence. The difference since then has been the absence of Purdy's best deep weapon.

No pass-catcher at any position with at least 20 deep targets in 2023 had a higher passer rating when targeted than Aiyuk (149.3). The 2020 first-round pick turned five of his 21 targets of 20 yards or more into touchdowns and averaged 31.2 yards per reception on his 14 catches of that distance. It is no surprise that, with Aiyuk missing most of 2024 through a gruesome knee injury and then deciding to force an exit from the 49ers, that San Francisco's downfield passing game has taken a step back from its 2023 zenith.

The injury to Purdy last year was also a factor. Mac Jones kept the train on the tracks in Purdy's absence with 'turf toe', but the 2021 first-round pick is not a passer on the same level as the 49ers' starter when going deep. While the downfield attack was not entirely removed from the picture with Jones at quarterback, San Francisco's passing game was much more focused on short to intermediate throws.

Evans' arrival in the Bay Area and the selection of De'Zhaun Stribling as the 49ers' top draft pick are moves made, in part, with the restoration of that devastating deep passing game in mind. In that same 2023 season, Evans outperformed Aiyuk on deep targets in several categories, as he averaged 34.6 yards per reception and racked up 484 receiving yards on targets of 20-plus yards, while his seven touchdowns on such plays were second only to Tyreek Hill's eight for Miami. Evans was targeted deep less frequently in 2024, but still turned four of his 15 downfield targets into touchdowns while averaging 31.4 yards per catch.

Last year, injuries limited Evans to just 100 yards on three receptions on throws of 20-plus yards but, despite those declining numbers, he has a clear track record of doing damage downfield, and his physical make-up means he does not always need clear

GOOD EVANS: Veteran Mike Evans (below) arrives for a San Fran swansong, hoping to capture one more 1000-yard season — and a ring.

separation to do so. Regardless of that ability, however, another member of the 49ers' ageing core made it clear that Evans was excelling at putting distance between himself and defenders in practice.

"Mike Evans, I learned, he doesn't usually go to OTAs, but he showed up to this because he's in a new offense for the first time in 12 years," Kittle told *Up and Adams*. "He cooks everybody. Don't care who it is. You can't just cover him 1-on-1, really. He's gonna win almost every single time. Him and Brock, like, immediately established a rhythm, which was really fun to watch."

That is excellent news for McCaffrey, as the presence of a consistently effective deep threat figures to present more clearly defined gaps for the 49ers in the run game. The tailback faced eight or more defenders in the box 29.26 percent of the time in 2025, per *NextGenStats*. That was way down from 2023, when he led the league as he faced eight defenders in the box 36 percent of the time, yet the crucial point of difference is that, three seasons ago, Aiyuk gave the Niners a way to severely punish defenses that loaded up against the run.

In 2024 and '25, San Fran largely did not have that advantage. The signing of Evans belatedly fills the void left by Aiyuk, giving the 49ers an X receiver who can win downfield and allow his team to present a more significant deep threat out of 21 personnel. Last season, the 49ers attempted 179 passes and 206 run plays with two backs and one tight end on the field, and led the NFL with 35.84 Expected Points Added, producing 21 explosive pass plays and 19 explosive rushes from that personnel group.

Evans' presence on the field should increase the scope for explosive plays out of 21 and enhance the already substantial impact of play-action passes when the 49ers use that formation. In short, the addition should leave defenses facing a difficult choice more often. Load the box against McCaffrey and risk being beaten over the top, or play with a lighter box and risk giving one of the greatest backs in NFL history more space to run into. Either way, for McCaffrey's body, the consequence is the same, a lowered risk of the kind of punishment that would speed up his journey towards that dreaded cliff.

Additionally, through the infusion of more speed into the offense, the 49ers theoretically have more avenues through which to stretch the field out of lighter personnel groupings.

The signing of Christian Kirk on a one-year deal was met with raised eyebrows by some but, after a year spent playing in a similar offense with former Los Angeles Rams assistant Nick Caley running the scheme for the Houston Texans, Shanahan expressed confidence that the 29-year-old can make an impact.

"I hated going against him in Arizona and, watching him on film this year, I think he looks like the same guy he's always looked like," Shanahan said of the receiver. "He had a couple of injuries that set him back but, when he came back from them, he's the same dude. He competes. He blocks."

JUMP MAN: The Niners are high on rookie Da'Zhaun Stribling (above), even though draft analysts thought they reached for the Ole Miss receiver.

CHRISTIAN MCCAFFREY **SEASON-BY-SEASON**

RUNNING MAN: McCaffrey (above) figures to go down as one of the NFL's best ever, despite critics claiming he wasn't an all-round RB coming out of Stanford.

SEASON	GAMES	TOUCHES	RUSH YARDS	REC YARDS	TDS	TEAM RECORD
2017	16	197	435	651	7	CAR 11-5
2018	16	326	1,098	867	13	CAR 7-9
2019	16	403	1,387	1,005	19	CAR 5-11
2020	3	76	225	149	6	CAR 5-11
2021	7	136	442	343	2	CAR 5-12
2022	17	329	1,139	741	13	CAR 1-5 SF 10-1
2023	16	339	1,459	564	21	SF 12-5
2024	4	65	202	146	0	SF 6-11
2025	17	413	1,202	924	17	SF 12-5

While the effort in the blocking game is the most critical part of that response in Shanahan's mind, the Texans' penultimate match-up of the 2025 season provided compelling evidence that Kirk can still be an extremely influential downfield weapon. After a regular season hindered by injuries, he exploded for 144 yards and a touchdown on eight catches in Houston's Wildcard win over the Pittsburgh Steelers, averaging 18 yards per reception. Kirk made catches of 36, 46 and 33 yards, displaying an ability to get open deep and rack up yards after the catch.

With Pearsall making some clutch downfield grabs early in 2025 before a knee injury ruined his second season, and Stribling adding to the 49ers' ranks of young speedsters at the position, the passing game has more tools with which to stretch defenses vertically and horizontally out of three, and maybe even four, receiver sets.

Per *Sports Info Solutions*, 39 percent of Stribling's routes in his final season at Ole Miss were run deep. That was the ninth-highest ratio among the receivers in the class charted by *SIS*. Stribling ranked third in class in EPA per target (0.56), illustrating his prowess for creating explosive plays.

In Stribling, Jacob Cowing and Jordan Watkins, the 49ers have drafted three receivers who ran times of 4.3secs in the 40-yard dash in as many years. Cowing and Watkins have yet to make a significant impression outside of preseason and speed is by no means a guarantee of success at the highest level. However, with a trio of wideouts with those physical gifts at their disposal, the potential the 49ers have out of 11, and maybe even 10, personnel is obvious.

Of course, getting production out of players of such inexperience is far from a guarantee, especially when the 49ers have a coach like Shanahan who has often proven reticent to put much trust in raw would-be playmakers. However, the strain they may be able put on defenses could also be beneficial for McCaffrey in clearing out underneath areas in the passing game and putting the running back in situations where he can move the ball against defenses forced to line up in lighter personnel packages, preoccupied by the possibility of giving up the deep pass.

In other words, after a 2025 season in which McCaffrey was frequently hit immediately by defenders, the 49ers have made a series of moves that, while primarily about the passing game, also have the possible dual benefit of moving those defenders out of the way by making them think about weapons beyond the superstar in the backfield.

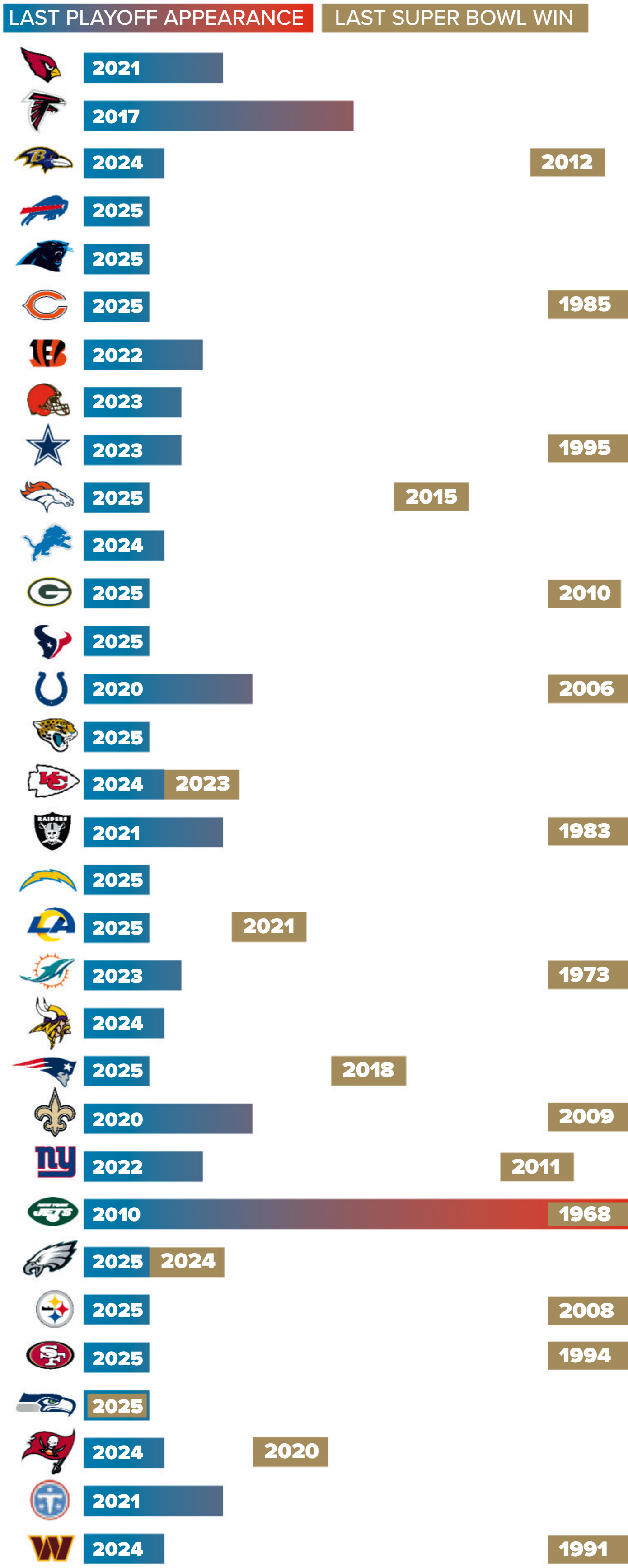
The focus on adding receivers may also remove some of the early season burden from Kittle's shoulders. The tight end is determined to be back for Week 1 but, if the 49ers can get their new receivers excelling in the opening part of the schedule, they will have the flexibility to be more mindful of managing his snaps and put him in a position to be at his best during the stretch run.

As is the case with McCaffrey, Kittle is unlikely to relish the prospect of less playing time. However, the 49ers have to think bigger picture. If they can avoid leaning too heavily on Kittle — still one of the premier blocking tight ends in the game — as he returns from a serious injury, and have him in peak condition when it matters most, then that should theoretically improve the odds of McCaffrey thriving on the ground and the entire offense performing at its best in the biggest games of the season.

For a 49ers team that has been has endured frankly absurd levels of injury adversity over recent years, the internal problem is the same. Their success relies on a lot of 'ifs', the biggest of which surrounds McCaffrey's success in holding up amid a workload that doesn't appear set to decrease anytime soon.

The external problem is that they have two nightmarish defensive teams in their division in the form of the Rams and the Seahawks. Yet, if the other chips fall in the 49ers' direction regarding the health of Evans and Kittle and the performance of their other field-stretching offensive players, McCaffrey should be well-placed to defy the doubters, avoid the cliff for another year and provide the primary fuel for an offense that has the upside to slay those divisional dragons and once again contend to finally get over the hump.

PLAYOFF DROUGHTS



SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

OWNER
Jed York

GM
John Lynch

HEAD COACH
Kyle Shanahan

STADIUM
Levis Stadium

2025 RECORD
12-5 (Lost NFC Divisional Round)

VERDICT

Still banking on veterans to get over the hump; still look likely to come up short.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★☆
OFFENSE:	★★★★★
DEFENSE:	★★★☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★★
COACHING:	★★★★★

THE CASE FOR

The best offensive mind of his generation has control of a star-studded attack, led by a quarterback in Brock Purdy who continues to defy game manager tropes with his impressive performances. A natural regression to the mean in terms of injuries on defense should see this team present a more robust challenge to return to the Super Bowl stage.

THE CASE AGAINST

The 49ers are relying on Christian McCaffrey to again survive a superhuman workload, while several of their key players on offense — Mike Evans, George Kittle and Ricky Pearsall — are coming off seasons hindered by injury. Even after a strong offseason, it's debatable whether this team has the depth to survive if the injury bug hits again.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Mike Evans, Wr; Christian Kirk, WR; Eddy Piñeiro, K; Dre Greenlaw, LB; Nate Hobbs, CB; Luke Gifford, LB; Robert Jones, G; Jack Jones, CB; Cameron Sample, DE; Jon Weeks, LS; Patrick Taylor, RB; Jake Tonges, TE; Corliss Waitman, P; Ashtyn Davis, S;

OUT

Jauan Jennings, WR; Spencer Burford, G; Bryce Huff, DE; Jason Pinnock, S; Kndrick Bourne, WR; Skyy Moore, WR; Ben Bartch, G; Brian Robinson Jr, RB; Matt Hennessy, C;

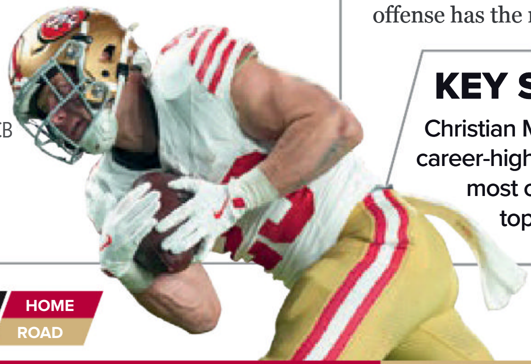
DRAFT

R2, P33	De'Zhaun Stribling, WR
R3, P70	Romello Height, DE
R3, P90	Kaelon Black, RB
R4, P107	Gracen Hilton, DT
R4, P127	Carver Willis, T
R4, P139	Ephesians Prysock, CB
R5, P154	Jaden Dugger, LB
R5, P179	Enrique Cruz Jr, T

OFFENSE

The 49ers go into any season knowing they have the best floor-raiser in the NFL in head coach Kyle Shanahan whose play-calling mastery gives the team an annual baseline of offensive performance — which is why they still finished sixth in EPA per play last season despite Brock Purdy missing eight games through injury. Purdy's supporting cast for 2026 is much changed. Jauan Jennings is gone, but the QB can call on future Hall-of-Famer Mike Evans following his free agent arrival. The hope will be that Evans, whose final year in Tampa Bay was disrupted by injury, can be a ball-dominant safety blanket for Purdy and provide a boost to an already excellent red-zone offense. Evans can also get open deep and, with the addition of first-round pick De'Zhaun Stribling and veteran Christian Kirk, downfield passes should be a bigger part of the 49er offense.

Purdy will also have the easy button of McCaffrey the receiver and, when he recovers from his Achilles injury, tight end George Kittle. Ageing but ultra-dependable, Purdy could hardly ask for a better triumvirate than CMC-Evans-Kittle. There is a question mark at left guard but the O-line is improving and the offense has the means to be a juggernaut again.



KEY STAT

Christian McCaffrey led the NFL with 413 touches last season, a career-high for the do-it-all star. Impressive durability after missing most of 2024 through injury saw 2025 mark CMC's third time topping the most touches after 2019 (403) and 2023 (339).

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 10	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 19	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8.	WK 9. Nov 8
AT LA	VS	VS	VS	AT	VS W	AT	BYE	VS

DEFENSE

San Francisco's efforts to get back to being a fearsome defensive team in 2025 were destroyed by injuries, chiefly to star edge rusher Nick Bosa and 'All-Everything' linebacker Fred Warner. The 49ers had the worst pass rush in the NFL in Bosa's absence, while linebacker became a black hole as injuries to Warner's back-ups mounted. Bosa and Warner will both be back for 2026 and, having traded for interior pass rusher Osa Odighizuwa and reunited Warner with Dre Greenlaw following the latter's sojourn in Denver, there's optimism for an upturn from this unit under new coordinator Raheem Morris.

Morris is well-versed in the Cover 3 'Seahawks style' defense that has underpinned the 49ers' defensive approach throughout the Shanahan tenure, but San Francisco's defensive fronts may be more diverse under his tutelage than they were under Robert Saleh last year. For Morris and his lieutenants, engineering pressure may be a task they face regularly given the 49ers' paucity of edge options outside of Bosa. And, with doubts over a safety position that was a revolving door last year, there is a lot for Morris to fix if he is to return this group to the upper echelons.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

20

The 49ers' league-low sack tally last season.

55.3

Brock Purdy's passing success rate in 2025. He led the NFL.

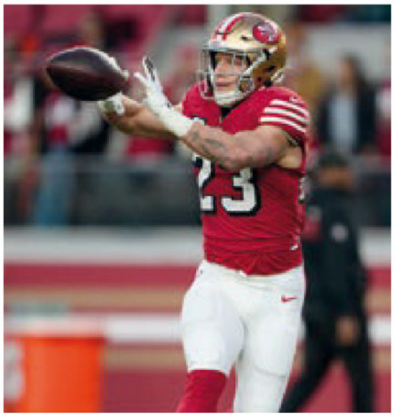
11

Straight 1,000-yard seasons by Mike Evans before his streak ended in 2025.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

The 49ers will hope that improved luck on the injury front will give them better odds of emerging ahead of the Los Angeles Rams and Seattle Seahawks as the class of the NFC, but the reality is that San Francisco does not have the requisite firepower on defense to be able to achieve their ambitions.

STAR MAN



CHRISTIAN MCCAFFREY

RB

The 49er offense still goes primarily as McCaffrey does. Last season, it was his skills as a receiver that shone brightest as the run game continually spluttered. McCaffrey averaged under four yards per carry for the first time since 2020, but he will hope that the addition of WR Mike Evans will help open things up for the ground game in 2026.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

UPTON STOUT

CB

Nickel corner Stout rode the rookie rollercoaster last season. While he was effectively picked on early in the campaign, Stout delivered plenty of standout plays that allowed the 49ers to keep faith, and the bright moments became more frequent late in the year. Aggressive in run support and with great instincts in coverage, Stout looks primed for a year two leap.

HEAT INDEX

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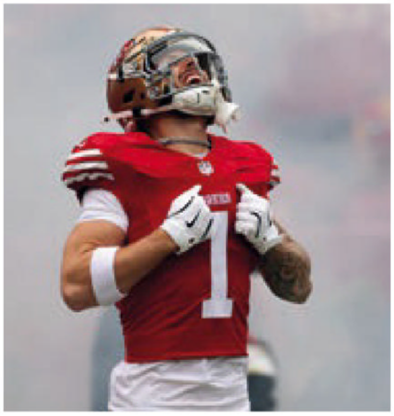


RICKY PEARSALL

WR

After being drafted in the first round in 2024, Pearsall saw his rookie year ruined by an August shooting that he miraculously survived. There were positive signs early in 2025, only for a knee injury to rob him of nine games. With the 49ers taking wideout De'Zhaun Stribling in the first round this year, Pearsall needs a healthy, successful season to prove he can be a long-term cornerstone.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 17	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	VS	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT

CEILING: *SUPER BOWL*

FLOOR: *MISS PLAYOFFS*

ARIZONA CARDINALS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
Michael Bidwill	Monti Ossenfort	Mike LaFleur	State Farm Stadium	3-14

VERDICT

Show signs of life under new head coach LaFleur, but still finish distant fourth in division.

QUARTERBACK:	★★☆☆☆
OFFENSE:	★★☆☆☆
DEFENSE:	★☆☆☆☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★☆☆☆☆
COACHING:	★★★☆☆

THE CASE FOR

The Cardinals have a huge amount of offensive talent after adding rookie RB Jeremiyah Love to the mix and, in a Shanahan-McVay disciple in Mike LaFleur, have a head coach who can get the best out of the likes of Marvin Harrison Jr, Michael Wilson and Trey McBride.

THE CASE AGAINST

They are in a contract dispute with Jacoby Brissett (of all people), with Gardner Minshew and rookie Carson Beck their alternatives at QB. Nothing about that sentence is inspiring and, with talk of Josh Sweat being traded away from a defense light on true difference-makers, there's little to suggest this is a team primed to contend in the West.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Tyler Allgeier, RB; Kendrick Bourne, WR; Gardner Minshew, QB; Isaac Seumalo, OL; Matt Pryor, OL; Jonah Williams, DL; Elijah Wilkinson, OL; Chd Ryland, K; Kenny Yeboah, TE; Isaiah Oliver, S; Devin Duvernay, WR; Teagan Quitoriano, TE; Andrew Billings, DT; Jack Gibbens, LB; Andrew Wingard, S; L.J. Collier, DE; Zonovan Knight, RB; Simi Fehoko, WR; Casey Kreiter, LS; Blake Gillikin, P

OUT

Kyler Murray, QB; Dalvin Tomlinson, DL; Akeem Davis-Gaither, LB; Bilal Nichols, DL; Joshua Karty, K;

DRAFT

R1, P3	Jeremiyah Love, RB
R2, P34	Chase Bisontis, G
R3, P65	Carson Beck, QB
R4, P104	Kaleb Proctor, DT
R5, P143	Reggie Virgil, WR
R6, P183	Karson Sharar, LB
R7, P217	Jayden Williams, OT

OFFENSE

Most of the pieces are there for the Cardinals' offense. Trey McBride is their clear top pass-catcher having emerged as a stud tight end and, while Marvin Harrison Jr. has yet to realise his enormous potential, he and Michael Wilson, who is coming off a 1,000-yard season, have the ability to develop into a dynamic wide receiver duo. The running game, meanwhile, has a much more formidable look following the selection of Jeremiyah Love with the third overall pick and the free agent addition of Tyler Allgeier.

The problems, however, are in the foundations that support the skill positions. Simply put, Arizona does not have a compelling answer at quarterback. Both Jacoby Brissett and Gardner Minshew are bridge signal-callers and it seems likely that the season will end with rookie third-round pick Carson Beck starting games. Even without a quarterback capable of elevating the rest of the team, the offensive line was in the bottom tier of the league last season. Significant additions have been made up front, particularly on the interior of the line, which may help raise the floor of the offense, but the ceiling is limited by the underwhelming situation under center.

KEY STAT

With 247 receptions over his last two seasons, Cardinals star Trey McBride is the first tight end in NFL history to have successive campaigns with at least 100 catches.

2026 SCHEDULE HOME ROAD

WK 1. Sep 13	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
AT	VS	AT	AT	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT
		SF	ny		LA			

CEILING: *SCRAPPY FRINGE PLAYOFF TEAM*

DEFENSE

The offense was the primary focus of the offseason for GM Monti Ossenfort, with the Cardinals largely sticking with the same personnel on defense, despite giving up 28.7 points per game, the fourth-most in the NFL. At the time of writing, reports have indicated the Cardinals have no desire to trade pass rusher Josh Sweat, which is understandable given the 12 sacks he recorded last year. Keeping hold of Sweat and getting increased contributions from their young players up front will be key if the Cardinals are to take a step forward in 2026, with former first-round picks Walter Nolen and Darius Robinson under pressure to deliver more than their three sacks combined last year.

After Sweat, no player other than Calais Campbell (6.5) had more than two sacks in 2025. Unfortunately, Campbell is no longer on the team... Elsewhere on the defense, the picture is mixed. Linebacker is a weak spot, but there's reason for optimism in the secondary, with safety arguably the strength of this unit and cornerback Denzel Burke coming off an encouraging rookie year. Coordinator Nick Rallis survived the change at head coach, and he'll look to vindicate that decision by getting further progress from the young pieces on this defense.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

10

Consecutive seasons without a playoff win

1

Winning seasons in those last 10 campaigns

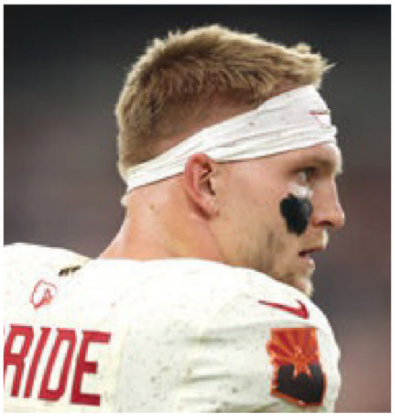
11

Receiving touchdowns scored by Trey McBride last year.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

The ingredients are there for the Cardinals to be better than the 3-14 mess that saw the end of Jonathan Gannon as head coach, but the cold, hard reality is that they reside in the toughest division in football and aren't anywhere near ready to challenge for it.

STAR MAN



TREY MCBRIDE

TE

For as much as there is great potential at other spots on this team, it's impossible to look beyond McBride as the straw that stirs the drink for the Cardinals' offense. He's established himself as one of the game's elite at tight end, but definitely needs more support from his team-mates.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

DENZEL BURKE

CB

The numbers from Burke's rookie year are very impressive. As a fifth-round pick, he outshone second-rounder Will Johnson in producing strong play in coverage, leading the Cardinals with 11 pass breakups and three interceptions last season and will become much more well known if he excels again in year two.

HEAT INDEX

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DARIUS ROBINSON

DL

A first-round pick in 2024, Robinson has struggled to justify that draft status, producing just a single sack in each of his two seasons with the team. The Cardinals will soon have to begin thinking about his fifth-year option, and the decision could be an easy one for them if Robinson doesn't put up better numbers.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11. Nov 22	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 6	WK 14.	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 27	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
VS	AT	VS	VS	BYE	VS	AT	VS	VS

FLOOR: *FIRST OVERALL PICK*

LOS ANGELES RAMS

OWNER
Stan Kroenke

GM
Les Snead

HEAD COACH
Sean McVay

STADIUM
SoFi Stadium

2025 RECORD
12-5 (Lost in NFC Championship game)

VERDICT

NFC looks destined to be Rams versus Seahawks again — and Myles Garrett should put L.A. over the top.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★★
OFFENSE:	★★★★★
DEFENSE:	★★★★☆
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★☆☆☆☆
COACHING:	★★★★★

THE CASE FOR

A roster packed with stars at almost every position. Sean McVay and Matthew Stafford is the best play-caller/coach combo in the NFL and the offense is teeming with weapons. The additions of Myles Garrett and Trent McDuffie give a fearsome look to a defense that was already in the top 10 in the league.

THE CASE AGAINST

The Rams had issues on special teams last season. Improvements will need to be made in the third facet of the game if they are to prevent the impact of their blockbuster moves from being undermined. Depth on defense is also an issue and if Matthew Stafford gets seriously hurt the season is dead.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Myles Garrett, DE; Trent McDuffie, CB; Jaylen Watson, CB; Tyler Higbee, TE; Kamren Curl, S; Grant Stuard, LB; Joe Cardona, LS; Keir Thomas, LB; Harrison Mevis, K; David Quessenberry, OL; Xavier Smith, WR; Larrell Murchison, DE; Ronnie Rivers, RB

OUT

Jared Verse, LB; Darious Williams, CB; Rob Havenstein, T; Cobie Durant, CB; Roger McCreary, CB

DRAFT

R1, P13	Ty Simpson, QB
R2, P61	Max Klare, TE
R3, P93	Keagen Trost, T
R6, P197	C.J. Daniels, WR
R7, P232	Tim Keenan III, DT

OFFENSE

Simply put, the Rams boast one of the most terrifying offenses in the NFL. Puka Nacua's off-field issues were far from ideal for Los Angeles but, in Nacua and Davante Adams, Matthew Stafford has a fearsome wide receiver duo at his disposal, complemented by a deep tight end group which allows the Rams the flexibility to attack teams with the passing game out of heavy personnel sets. The Rams can also run the ball down the throats of defenses out of those sets, with Kyren Williams and Blake Corum each able to thrive on the ground on both gap and zone scheme runs.

With the scheme overseen by Sean McVay's beautiful mind and the offense helmed by a quarterback in Stafford who, even at the age of 38, can make throws beyond the realms of possibility for most signal-callers, the Rams arguably have more avenues to success on offense than any other team in the league. Keeping Stafford upright is the key, but the solidity of the interior line and the intriguing development of their two tackles should give the Rams great confidence in their abilities to do that and prosper in 2026.

WILLIAMS
1
DETROIT
14
GIBBS
0

KEY STAT

The Rams had a success rate of 52.2 percent on offense last season, meaning that over half of their offensive plays gained the required yardage for a successful play on a given down. No other team in the NFL reached even 50 percent.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 10	WK 2. Sep 21	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 12	WK 6. Oct 18	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 1	WK 9. Nov 8
VS SF	VS ny	AT	AT	VS	VS	AT RAIDERS	VS	AT W

DEFENSE

The Rams were already in an excellent position on defense even before their stunning all-in move for Myles Garrett, which saw them send an exciting young edge rusher in Jared Verse to the Cleveland Browns as part of the package to land one of the best defensive players in NFL history. Garrett is coming off breaking the single-season sack record, and seemingly speeding up rather than slowing down as he enters his thirties. His arrival weaponises an extremely talented defensive front blessed with young stars in Braden Fiske, Kobie Turner and Byron Young, all of whom figure to benefit hugely from the trade.

An earlier offseason trade for Trent McDuffie and the signing of fellow former Kansas City Chiefs cornerback Jaylen Watson should allow the Rams to play man coverage more effectively, opening more pressure package options to a defense that should be able to win with four more regularly because of the addition of Garrett. Like the offense, this is a unit with a lot of strings to its bow. Still, there are questions about the linebacker position and the depth of the group, and it would only take a couple of injuries for those concerns to grow more pertinent.

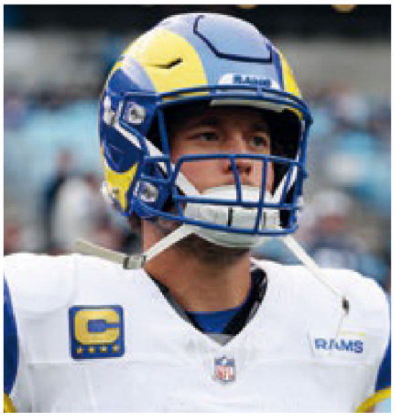
NUMBERS TO KNOW

23	Myles Garrett's record-breaking 2025 sack tally.
46	Passing touchdowns thrown by Matthew Stafford last year.
102	Wins by Sean McVay as head coach, including postseason (10).

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

The Rams don't have the same depth to call on as the Seahawks, with the 2026 season a bet on a star-studded top-heavy roster to get over the top. Looking around the league right now, however, it's difficult to make a strong case for anyone being able to prevent them from doing so.

STAR MAN



MATTHEW STAFFORD

QB

There's a litany of options to choose from but, coming off his first MVP season and heading into likely his last year in the NFL, Stafford gets the nod. While not a dual-threat, few quarterbacks in the game can elevate an offense like Stafford. For all the stars elsewhere on the team, the Rams' hopes rest predominantly with their veteran.

BREAKOUT PLAYER

BRADEN FISKE

DL

Fiske was separated from his former Florida State team-mate Jared Verse as a result of the Myles Garrett trade. However, the impact of a generational defensive talent joining the team could be huge for Fiske, who figures to be one of the primary beneficiaries of the extra attention Garrett will attract from pass protection schemes.

HEAT INDEX

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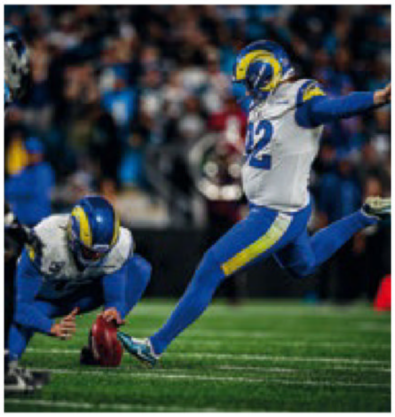


HARRISON MEVIS

K

The Rams' kicking situation was a disaster for much of the 2025 campaign before they brought in Mevis to replace Joshua Karty. Mevis missed only one field goal, in an overtime loss to the Seahawks, after taking over in Week 9. Yet, with how much they have invested in winning now, the Rams will likely have Mevis on a short leash.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11.	WK 12. Nov 25	WK 13. Dec 3	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 20	WK 16. Dec 25	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	BYE	VS	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT	VS

CEILING: *WINNING IT ALL*

FLOOR: *MISSING THE PLAYOFFS*

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

OWNER	GM	HEAD COACH	STADIUM	2025 RECORD
The Paul Allen Estate	John Schneider	Mike Macdonald	Lumen Field	14-3 (Won Super Bowl LX)

VERDICT

Extremely well constructed for repeat title bid; division rival may have a little more firepower.

QUARTERBACK:	★★★★☆
OFFENSE:	★★★★☆
DEFENSE:	★★★★★
SPECIAL TEAMS:	★★★★★
COACHING:	★★★★★

THE CASE FOR

The roster retains many core pieces from last season's Super Bowl run, with the offense boasting arguably the NFL's premier wide receiver in Jaxon Smith-Njigba and the defense possessing top-tier talent at every level. With the best defensive mind in the sport overseeing a group well equipped to execute his scheme, it's an excellent recipe for success.

THE CASE AGAINST

Changes were made at most positions on the offensive coaching staff after Brian Fleury replaced Klint Kubiak as OC, while the Seahawks also lost Super Bowl MVP running back Kenneth Walker as well as two starters in the secondary in Tariq Woolen and Coby Bryant. The D-line is ultra-disruptive but ageing, and right guard remains a problem area on the O-line.

KEY TRANSACTIONS

SIGNED/RE-SIGNED

Dante Fowler, DE; Bobby Hart, T; Irvin Charles, WR; Harrison Bryant, TE; Ty Okada, S; Chazz Surratt, LB; D'Anthony Bell, DB; Shemar Jean-Charles, DB; Chris Stoll, LS; Cody White, WR; George Holani, RB; Brandon Pili, DT; Noah Igbinoghene, CB; Rodney Thomas, DB; Cam Akers, RB; Velus Jones Jr, RB;

OUT

Kenneth Walker III, RB; Boye Mafe, DE; Coby Bryant, CB; Riq Woolen, CB; Cam Akers, RB;

DRAFT

R1, P32	Jadarian Price, RB
R2, P64	Bud Clark, S
R3, P99	JuLian Neal, CB
R5, P148	Beau Stephens, G
R6, P199	Emmanuel Henderson Jr, WR
R7, P236	Andre Fuller, CB
R7, P242	Deven Eastern, DT
R7, P255	Michael Dansby, CB

OFFENSE

Yes, Sam Darnold and the Seattle offense were helped massively by the efforts of the team's dominant defense last season, but that does not mean their exploits were not seriously impressive. The Seahawks finished eighth in dropback EPA per play and fourth in dropback success rate as Darnold and Jaxon Smith-Njigba built a devastating rapport that formed the driving force of the Seattle attack in 2025. A change to a new OC will not change JSN's position as the focal point of the offense, while tight end A.J. Barner and 2025 fifth-round pick Tory Horton proved key in providing scoring production as role players, combining for 11 receiving touchdowns. While Cooper Kupp still added value in his first season with the Seahawks, Seattle will look for Horton to take another step forward and for speedster Rashid Shaheed to further justify last year's mid-season trade by making a consistent impact in the passing game.

The biggest question for the Seattle offense, though, concerns the run game. With Kenneth Walker III having departed for Kansas City and Zach Charbonnet tearing his ACL in January, all eyes will be on rookie first-rounder Jadarian Price as he tries to live up to that draft status in a hurry.

KEY STAT

The Seahawks allowed only 17.2 points per game last season, the lowest mark in the NFL, while also giving up just 4.6 yards per play in a season where only five teams produced more turnovers than their 25.

2026 SCHEDULE

HOME
ROAD

WK 1. Sep 9	WK 2. Sep 20	WK 3. Sep 27	WK 4. Oct 4	WK 5. Oct 11	WK 6. Oct 15	WK 7. Oct 25	WK 8. Nov 2	WK 9. Nov 8
VS	AT	AT W	VS	VS SF	AT	VS KC	VS C	VS

CEILING: *SUPER BOWL RETURN*

DEFENSE

It will largely be more of the same on the defense from the Seahawks after their defensive unit overwhelmed the New England Patriots to secure the Lombardi Trophy. In this case, more of the same means a renewed barrage of pressure created by the Seahawks' fierce defensive line, and more of the varied pressure packages and coverage disguises from HC Mike Macdonald that allowed Seattle to frequently throttle opposing attacks.

Despite the departures of Coby Bryant and Boye Mafe, there is important continuity on defense for Seattle. The D-line is a little on the older side, and there is likely to be a big spotlight on safety Ty Okada as he attempts to fill the void left by Bryant. However, the presence of chess pieces Devon Witherspoon and Nick Emmanwori, and one of the better linebacker duos in the game in Ernest Jones and Drake Thomas, should mean Macdonald has everything he needs to confound offenses again in 2026. Opponents have had an offseason to study the Seahawks and try to find holes in Macdonald's defense but, until somebody shows they exist, it will continue to be the foundation for a team that has the potential to compete for multiple titles.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

67.7

Sam Darnold's completion percentage last season, the highest of his career.

3.84

Yards per route run gained by Jaxon Smith-Njigba vs man coverage (1st among WRs, min. 25 targets).

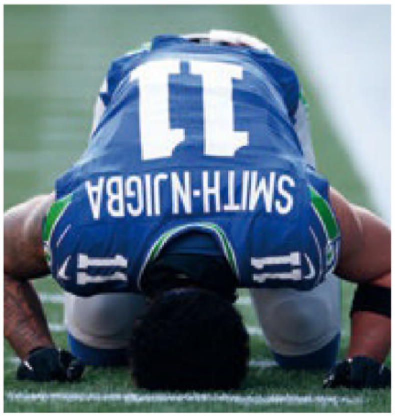
5

Interceptions by LB Ernest Jones in 2025, tied for second-most in the NFL.

GRIDIRON'S PREDICTION

When assessing the NFC, it's difficult to look past a rematch of last season's NFC Championship game between the Seahawks and the Los Angeles Rams. Seattle had the edge back in January but a combination of the Rams' blockbuster moves and the Seahawks' offseason losses may just tilt things the other way.

STAR MAN

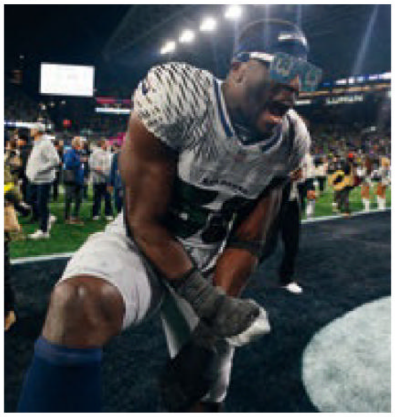


JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA

WR

The Seahawks put the majority of their eggs in Smith-Njigba's basket from a passing game perspective last year and were rewarded with a spectacular season in which he came just seven yards shy of 1,800. A wonderfully skilled route-runner who can do damage from any alignment and is great after the catch, it's scary to think about how good JSN could still become.

BREAKOUT PLAYER



DERICK HALL

EDGE

Hall saved his best for the Super Bowl with two sacks in the beatdown of the Patriots and, across the regular season and playoffs, led the Seahawks with a pass rush win rate of 15.5 percent. With Boye Mafe gone and DeMarcus Lawrence and Dante Fowler both in their 30s, Hall should have the opportunities to emphatically vindicate his $42m extension.

HEAT INDEX

🔥🔥

ANTHONY BRADFORD

G

The holes on the Seahawks' roster are very few, but one player who remains under the microscope is right guard Bradford, who stands as the weakest member of an offensive line that made marked improvements last season. The good news for Bradford is that his back-up is a rookie in Beau Stephens, but he still cannot afford a poor start to the campaign.

WK 10. Nov 15	WK 11.	WK 12. Nov 29	WK 13. Dec 7	WK 14. Dec 13	WK 15. Dec 19	WK 16. Dec 25	WK 17. Jan 3	WK 18. Jan 10
AT	BYE	AT	VS	VS	AT	VS	AT	AT

FLOOR: *MISS PLAYOFFS*

KINGDOM COMETH

Long before UCF, Arthur Kingdom was creating opportunities for himself around Europe. Now, after years spent forging his own path, the British linebacker is preparing for his biggest move yet.

CRAIG LLEWELLYN

EDITOR

𝕏 *@craig_gridiron*

GAZI
KPRO
PRAGUE
0

The call came while Arthur Kingdom was in the United States and, on the face of it, should have changed everything.

For three months, Florida had become home. Not permanently, perhaps, but long enough for routines to have been established. Mornings and afternoons at XPE Sports blurred into one another as he threw himself into the kind of preparation most British players could scarcely imagine. Amid training sessions and workouts alongside players preparing for the NFL Draft, there were conversations with coaches, conversations with agents and countless hours spent around athletes whose ambitions mirrored his own.

Images of Madrid existed somewhere in the background, not exactly an afterthought, but more of a safety net. Contracts had been signed and plans made. If the opportunity in the United States failed to materialise, there would still be football in Spain. But Spain had never been the dream.

By the time the call came, Kingdom was already immersed in the process of trying to force open another door. The voice on the line brought unwelcome news. The Bravos, who had intended to join the European Football Alliance following the collapse of the European League of Football, would not be taking the field after all.

> **“MY WHOLE MINDSET THIS ENTIRE TIME HAD BEEN THAT ‘I’M GOING TO MAKE IT HAPPEN’**

For plenty of players, the collapse of a team before a season begins might have triggered panic as the latest cruel twist in a sport that often asks for sacrifices without offering guarantees in return. Instead, Kingdom listened, appreciated the support offered by the organisation and went back to work.

“My whole mindset this entire time had been that ‘I’m going to make it happen’ sort of thing,” he tells *Gridiron* early in what became a long exploration of football’s oft-rocky road. “So, mentally, that news didn’t really affect me at all because, in my head, I kind of already knew that I wasn’t planning on playing for Madrid.”

He doesn’t say it dismissively, and there is certainly no bravado attached to the statement. Curiously, given the news imparted from back in Europe, there was a simple certainty.

“I was in Florida, I was training and the main goal was still to play in the States,” Kingdom explains. “At that point, however, it shifted to ‘let’s go get into college somewhere’.

“Originally, I was invited to the CFL Draft, so I was kind of training for that, but then college coaches came down, saw what I was doing and became interested, so I was training for that too. Once college became more of a probability, I turned down the CFL option and said, ‘Let’s go for it!’.”

That level of certainty might sound unusual, even arrogant. It is neither. Spend an hour in Kingdom’s company and one thing quickly becomes clear. He does not talk like somebody who has stumbled into opportunities, rather somebody who expects to earn them. There is a quiet self-belief behind almost every answer. Not entitlement. Just conviction.

The path might have changed, but his ultimate destination hadn’t. And perhaps that was fitting, because uncertainty had become a familiar companion long before Madrid disappeared. By 22, Kingdom had already lived on three continents, repeatedly changed countries and learned to view each fresh start not as a disruption, but simply another chapter.

* * *

The reality is that his journey has never really paused long enough for anything, least of all celebration or commiseration.

Before Florida, there was Prague.

Before Prague, came Potsdam.

Before Germany, there was Leeds Beckett and the Manchester Titans.

Before Britain, there was America.

Before America, Australia.

Even now, at 22, Kingdom speaks less like somebody who has reached his destination and more like a traveller preparing for the next leg. And that is hardly surprising for, although he now carries the hopes of British American football into the Big 12, Kingdom’s upbringing was anything but conventional.

> “YOU COULDN’T REALLY AVOID IT — YOU JUST HAVE TO GO ALL IN

Born in Australia, he spent much of his childhood following his mother’s work around the world. Britain featured in his story, but not nearly as much as many assume.

“I actually haven’t spent that much time in the UK at all growing up,” he says, “but I’ve played sport ever since I was four years old.”

Rugby formed a large part of that early life. His father coached him for much of his childhood, while later becoming involved with the UCLA rugby programme during the family’s time in America. But, despite arriving on the game’s doorstep, American football itself arrived comparatively late.

“I didn’t find football until I was like… God, how old was I? Fifteen, sixteen, probably,” Kingdom recalls. “We moved to the States and that’s where it really picked up. Football is the main culture over there and you couldn’t really avoid it — you just have to go all in.”

The transition felt natural, but adjusting to the game was another matter.

“I mean, I’m a competitor,” Kingdom smiles. “I was a big rugby player growing up, so the competitor was already in me — and the drive and playing sport with a team didn’t really change much at all.

“The difficult part was obviously learning the game. I’d never played it before, but it’s like anything. The more you do it, the better you get at it.”

···· ●····

Eventually the family returned to Britain and, like most British players, Kingdom’s football ambitions were sustained more by enthusiasm than any expectation of reward. For all the assumptions that accompany his journey now, there was no immediate ascent, no rapid domination of the British game. Instead, there was a place on the bench. For all the previous speed and violence he’d felt on the field, football now demanded patience.

“Everywhere I’ve gone and played, football has provided different learning lessons, and life lessons as well,” Kingdom admits, recalling his spell with the Manchester Titans in Britain’s national league. “Titans was great, but I didn’t start. I was on the bench, kind of a rotational guy, coming in and out [of games].”

Ambitious as he was, it would have been easy for Kingdom to become frustrated. Instead, he allowed the experience to shape him.

“It taught me how to be a better team-mate,” he explains, “...and that you’ve got to really want to get good at something because you’ve got to beat out the guy ahead of you.”

By the time Kingdom enrolled at Leeds Beckett University, American football had carved out a reputation on campus. The programme had already established itself among the strongest in the country, winning a national title in 2019 and boasting a structure that more closely resembled an elite sports environment than the stereotypical image many still associate with British university football. Film study, strength and conditioning and sports science support all formed part of the routine, but reality remained as British players still had to balance their sporting ambitions with the demands of student life.

L.B.M
PHOTOGRAPHY

“Arthur had a bigger, more athletic frame than just about every other UK player on the team,” recalls former teammate Eli Turner. “And he liked to joke around a lot.”

Turner admits he never envisaged America being in Kingdom’s future, largely because of the eligibility hurdles facing international players. What he did see, however, was steady growth.

“He had great instincts, which is especially important at his position, and he knew the game well,” Turner, now on the coaching staff at Rice University, tells *Gridiron*. “He went from a young, talented and playful teammate to more of a thoughtful leader in my one year with him.”

> **“ HANG ON A MINUTE, MAYBE THERE’S SOMETHING I COULD DO HERE**

Nothing about playing for the university felt glamorous and yet, somewhere in the Pennines between Manchester and Headingley, Kingdom’s relationship with football changed. A successful tryout for the GB national team opened another avenue for his ambition and, along with his performances on the field for LBU, prompted a call from Great Britain coach Jason Scott, inviting him to take part in the first joint BAFA/CFL Combine.

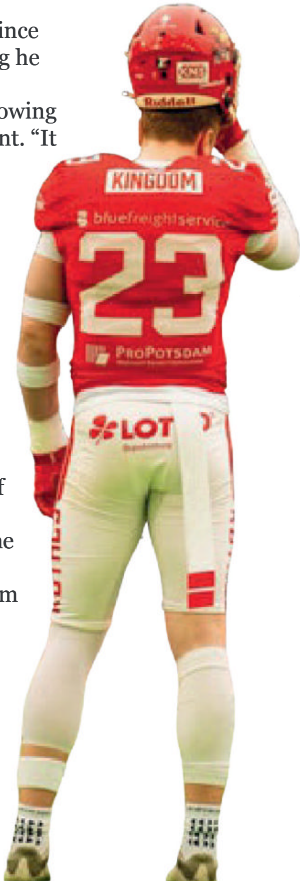
“I firmly believe that we have some of the best players in Europe,” Scott said as 50 hopefuls showed up and were put through drills at the University of Nottingham in February of 2024. “Hopefully, this will give them an opportunity to put themselves in the shop window for both the CFL and other European professional leagues.”

The invitation provided the validation Kingdom had been seeking for his burgeoning ambitions within the game.

“It opened my eyes a bit, and I began thinking, ‘Hang on a minute, maybe there’s something I could do here’,” he confirms. “It was the first time someone had believed in me regarding my football journey, just by putting me out there and saying, ‘Take a look at this kid’.”

That vote of confidence would prove enough to convince Kingdom that football was no longer simply something he enjoyed. Now he needed to start to invest in it.

“I finally took my offseason seriously,” he smiles, knowing that, almost immediately, the rewards became apparent. “It moved very quickly from there,”



* * *

After just three games in the black-and-purple of Beckett, Kingdom had already started looking beyond Britain, contacting teams in Germany and discovering that opportunities existed for those willing to seek them.

His eventual move to Potsdam, having been initiated by his desire to progress, was facilitated by connections forged through Great Britain’s national team. David Saul, then offensive coordinator and general manager of the recently-crowned Royals, consulted GB linebackers coach Ed Cheadle before deciding to take a chance on the coach’s endorsement.

“He kind of said, ‘Alright, let’s take a risk, let’s get him in here’,” Kingdom recalls, “...and I’m so very grateful for that opportunity.”

Moving abroad barely registered as the culture shock other youngsters might have expected. Those years spent in Australia, America and Switzerland had already prepared him for changing environments, although the sudden move to adulthood arrived with something of a jolt.

“I was literally paid to play football, which was kind of cool,” Kingdom says, his smile returning at the thought. “Granted, it wasn’t very much, but it was still the precedent of you getting a paycheque every month.”

The greater adjustment was to total independence, with budgets to manage and responsibilities to handle.

“It was the first time I was truly on my own, living as an adult for the first time, by myself, sort of thing,” Kingdom says. “Suddenly, your money’s got to get you this much for a month...”

But it was on the field where Potsdam, a city of 180,000+ some 25km downstream from Berlin, most altered his life. Kingdom found himself immersed in a college-style defensive system under coordinator Mitch Viger, surrounded by American imports who had experienced levels he hoped one day to reach.

“They threw me right in at the deep end, but I like to say I’m a football nerd,” the Briton admits. “So I asked as many questions as I could; tried to absorb as much information as possible.”

The classroom extended beyond team meetings. Erstwhile Boise State quarterback Jaylen Henderson became one of Kingdom’s closest friends, while safety Aashari Crosswell brought NFL and USFL experience.

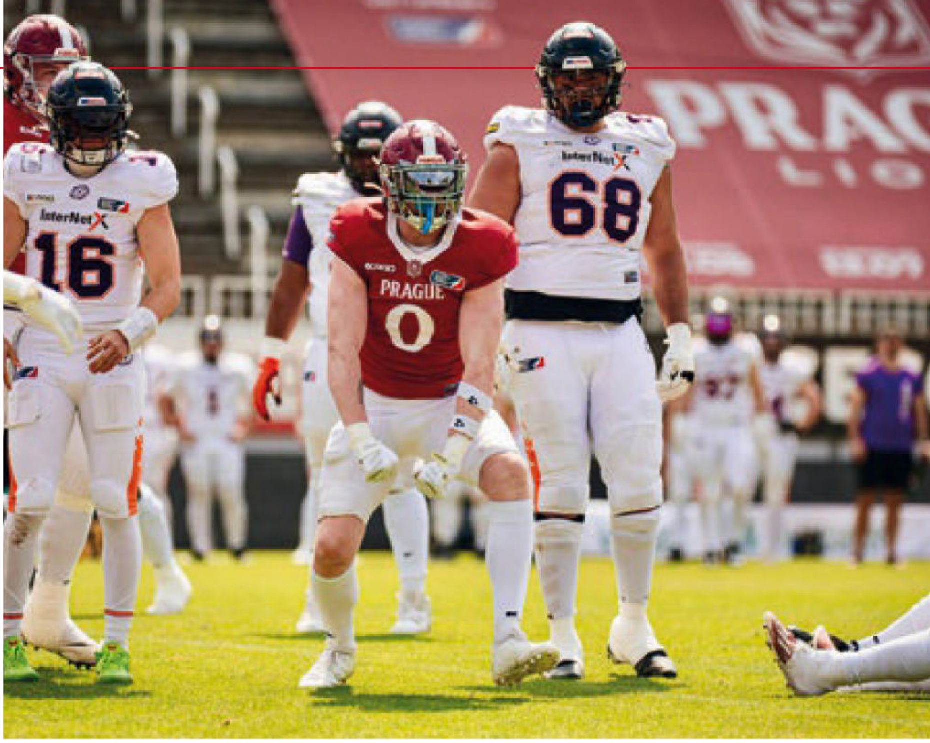
“The most fun part was watching film with them, studying the game,” he says. “Being like, ‘Okay, what are you seeing here?’. The biggest part of the game, the one that you can get better at most quickly, is studying it.

“Coach Viger was awesome too. He challenged me just the right amount and held me accountable for my mistakes, which I need. He was a huge part of my development for sure.”

Emphasising the gap between the British and German national leagues, Kingdom reveals, still somewhat disbelievingly, that Potsdam ‘definitely felt more professional’ from team meetings and film sessions, via access to the coaches and even the facilities that he got to play and practice at multiple times a week.

“Literally, you ask and they’d do,” he reveals, remembering the army of volunteers that helped sustain the club and, without whom, European football would pale into insignificance. “It was absurd to me.”

* * *



One year in Germany, albeit on the Royals roster as they overcame Dresden Monarchs for what became the second in an unbroken run of three German Bowl titles, was enough to further focus Kingdom's ambitions. The European League of Football was moving into its fifth season, with 16 teams from around the continent vying for supremacy, and clearly represented the next rung on the ladder.

Despite again making the first move, however, there was initially only lukewarm interest in the Briton before, eventually, Prague came calling.

Not that Kingdom was immediately convinced.

"I won't lie, I was very sceptical," he admits, citing the Lions' two winless seasons since joining the ELF and stories from previous years that lingered forebodingly, "... but it was the best opportunity I had available to me."

On paper, the contrast with Potsdam could hardly have been greater. The Royals had been defending champions when he joined them; Prague had forgotten what winning felt like. Conversations with players and coaches persuaded him, however, with recently-installed defensive coordinator James Brooks helping convince him to move.

"The first thing you notice is his size," Brooks tells *Gridiron*, echoing Turner's earlier assessment of the player. "And then, once he got on the field, you noticed his athletic ability and football IQ."

Kingdom's impact, Brooks insists, was immediate.

"Day one," he claims. "He's a very cerebral football player. He was a leader from day one and I think he's built for that. It's in his DNA."

Surprisingly, for all that Prague represented another fresh start for Kingdom and another step on his chosen path, it quickly became much more than that.

"Prague was arguably the most fun football I've ever had," Kingdom admits to *Gridiron* in the midst of what is already a lengthy conversation, before revealing that he once again found himself at the foot of a learning curve.

Week one offered an immediate education as, facing the imposing Vienna Vikings and finding himself on kickoff coverage, Kingdom realised that, in football terms at least, this really was another league. One moment, he thought he had the returner lined up; the next, he was staring at empty grass.

"He puts his foot in the ground, hits another gear and I'm left for dust," Kingdom says with a laugh. "I was like, 'Okay, this is a different speed again'."

It was his welcome-to-the-league moment and, while adaptation had become second nature, the challenges, both technical and physical, kept coming. Missed tackles, pass-rush deficiencies and late-game concentration were all noted by the sideline and Prague's coaching staff demanded improvement. Kingdom welcomed the pressure, even making an unusual request of Brooks.

"That first game was a little bit of a shock," he accepts, "... but, after that, football's football. I told him, 'Look, if I start bullsh*tting, let me know about it; shout at me to wake me up'."

Brooks obliged. One time.

"It happened once in the season and it never happened again," Kingdom confirms. "Coach was like, 'Well, you weren't lying'."

Off the field, the organisation — now firmly under the control of American Mason Parker, who decided to acquire the Lions after witnessing their woeful state on a visit to Prague — exceeded every expectation.

"They treated me like royalty," Kingdom says. "I have to give a lot of credit to Mason for the way he runs it. It was some of the best six months of my life."

Away from the field, Brooks saw the same qualities that Kingdom exhibited on it.

"Arthur's a no-nonsense type of guy. Not a lot of partying, etc," the now head coach reveals. "He's intense and he's highly focused."

Brooks' outlook resonated with Kingdom and, as the season progressed, Prague gradually shed the reputation they had acquired over two miserable years. Not completely, and not overnight, but enough to challenge perceptions — and even enough to fight for the playoffs.

"I never thought that being part of a team and changing the culture could be like that but, even though we didn't make the playoffs, it was still the most rewarding football season I've played so far," Kingdom says. "We got everyone to believe that we were good enough and not the Lions of old."

Brooks believes that whatever lies in Kingdom's future will carry weight beyond one player's journey; that 'with the right coaching and development, Europe can produce Division I athletes on a regular basis'.

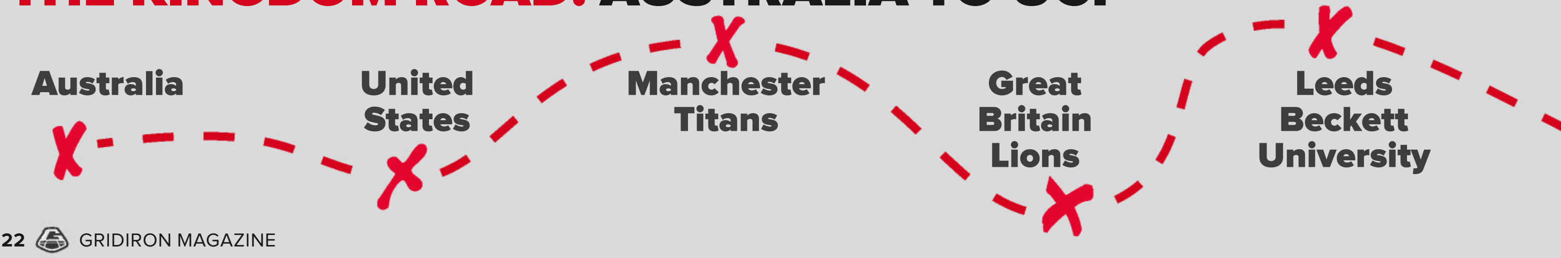
As for whether he always thought Kingdom was destined for bigger things, Brooks smiles.

"I think *he* thinks he is destined for something bigger and greater, and that's all that matters."

MANE MAN: Kingdom quickly became central to all the Prague defense did (above), benefitting from the backing of DC James Brooks (below right) and loving football in the ELF (below).

* * *

THE KINGDOM ROAD: AUSTRALIA TO UCF



If the Royals had taught Kingdom how to be a professional, the Lions had reminded him why he loved the game in the first place. So, when America finally re-entered the picture, Kingdom approached the opportunity with the same steady focus that had carried him from Manchester to Potsdam and Potsdam to Prague.

Florida, meanwhile, offered another lesson — in restraint. There were no distractions. No nights out. No sightseeing. For three months, life revolved around training, with Ethan Maurisak, one of Kingdom's coaches at XPE, quickly noticing the newcomer's single-mindedness.

"On off days, I would catch him coming into the gym just to stretch and move around when no-one else was in here," Maurisak tells *Gridiron*. "The active NFL players instantly took a liking to him, and he quickly became a member of the group, but he was extremely focused on getting the most out of his time here. He was clearly only here to train."

South Florida can offer plenty of temptations to a young athlete, as multiple NFL pros can attest, but Maurisak found Kingdom's life choices refreshingly simple.

"When I asked what he had planned for the weekend, he'd say he was just going to rest and order some good food," the performance coach reveals, before going on to explain that, just as importantly, Kingdom never looked out of place despite the company he was keeping.

"Physically, he fit right in," Maurisak notes. "Looking at him training with the rest of the guys, you wouldn't have thought twice that he'd come from a Division I football programme. He's a big guy who certainly looks the part of a football player but, other than that, he's a natural athlete too. We essentially threw him right in and he performed."

Watching Kingdom compete alongside aspiring NFL players and league veterans, Maurisak became convinced that, if somebody gave him an opportunity, he would have no problem holding his own.

It turned out somebody already had.

* * *

Even then, nothing came easily. Kingdom's agent contacted schools, but responses were sparse.

"We're not looking for linebackers."

"We're not looking for anyone."

To Kingdom, the reactions felt less like a dead end and more like a reluctance to take a chance on somebody from outside the traditional football pathway.

"It was all just an excuse to say, 'We don't want to take the risk'," he claims. "Of course, it *is* a high risk, but it's also high reward because, basically, I'm nobody when it comes to college football so, if it doesn't work out for them, then it doesn't really matter. But, if it *does* work out, they'll look like geniuses."

Again, one contact changed everything. An unofficial visit to spring practice at the University of Central Florida, a mere three-and-a-bit hours up the Florida turnpike from XPE's headquarters in Fort Lauderdale, showed Kingdom facilities unlike anything he had experienced before — and he immediately knew what he wanted his next move to be.

"I stepped into that building and it felt right," he tells *Gridiron*. "I got to watch practice, met the head coach, Scott Frost, and had some really cool conversations with people. From that experience, I felt like they were interested."

Which made the ensuing silence all the more frustrating. Two weeks of nothing. The clock was ticking down to the day he was due to leave the United States, and Kingdom oscillated between thinking the opportunity had probably gone and continuing to play the waiting game. Four days before his flight, the call finally came.

"Don't leave."

An official visit followed, with a lot more time to go in-depth with the coach and staff, ask about scheme and where he might improve. Then more silence. Kingdom flew home on the first day of May while Frost spoke with his linebackers coach and assorted coordinators to see if they were aligned. Then...

"Let's do it."

Frost, himself, made the call after a weekend of deliberation — and the biggest reaction came not from Arthur, but from the people around him.

"My family went nuts when I got the call," he reveals. "They were screaming and going crazy. I had to remind them, 'We're not done yet'."

For Kingdom, it was simply the next stop on a journey he hopes has a long way to go.

"It still hasn't settled in," he admits, "...but I am on a mission, so to speak, and this is just the next step."

"HE WAS A LEADER FROM DAY ONE AND I THINK HE'S BUILT FOR THAT. IT'S IN HIS DNA

Despite having been offered a precious scholarship, Kingdom insists there is little time for nostalgia, and no intention of simply enjoying the experience. Equally, there is no desire for a redshirt season.

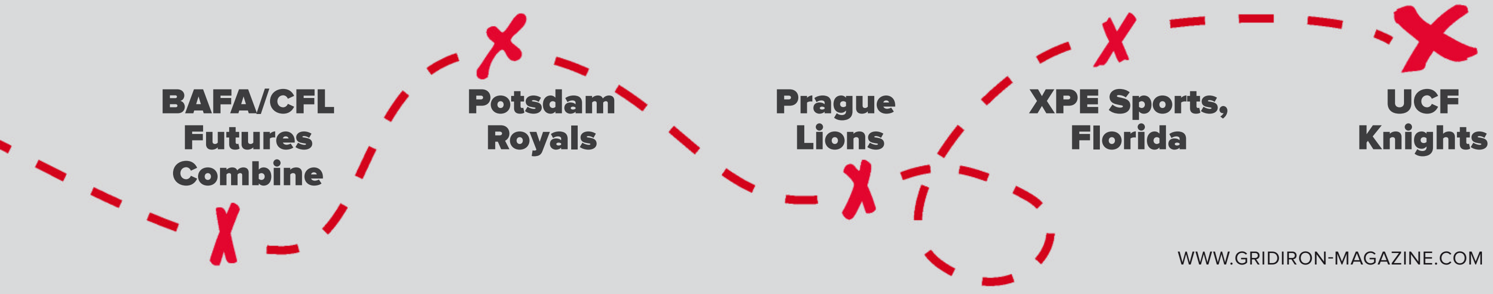
"My goal is to go in and start, to steal a starting job," Kingdom insists. "I don't have time to mess about."

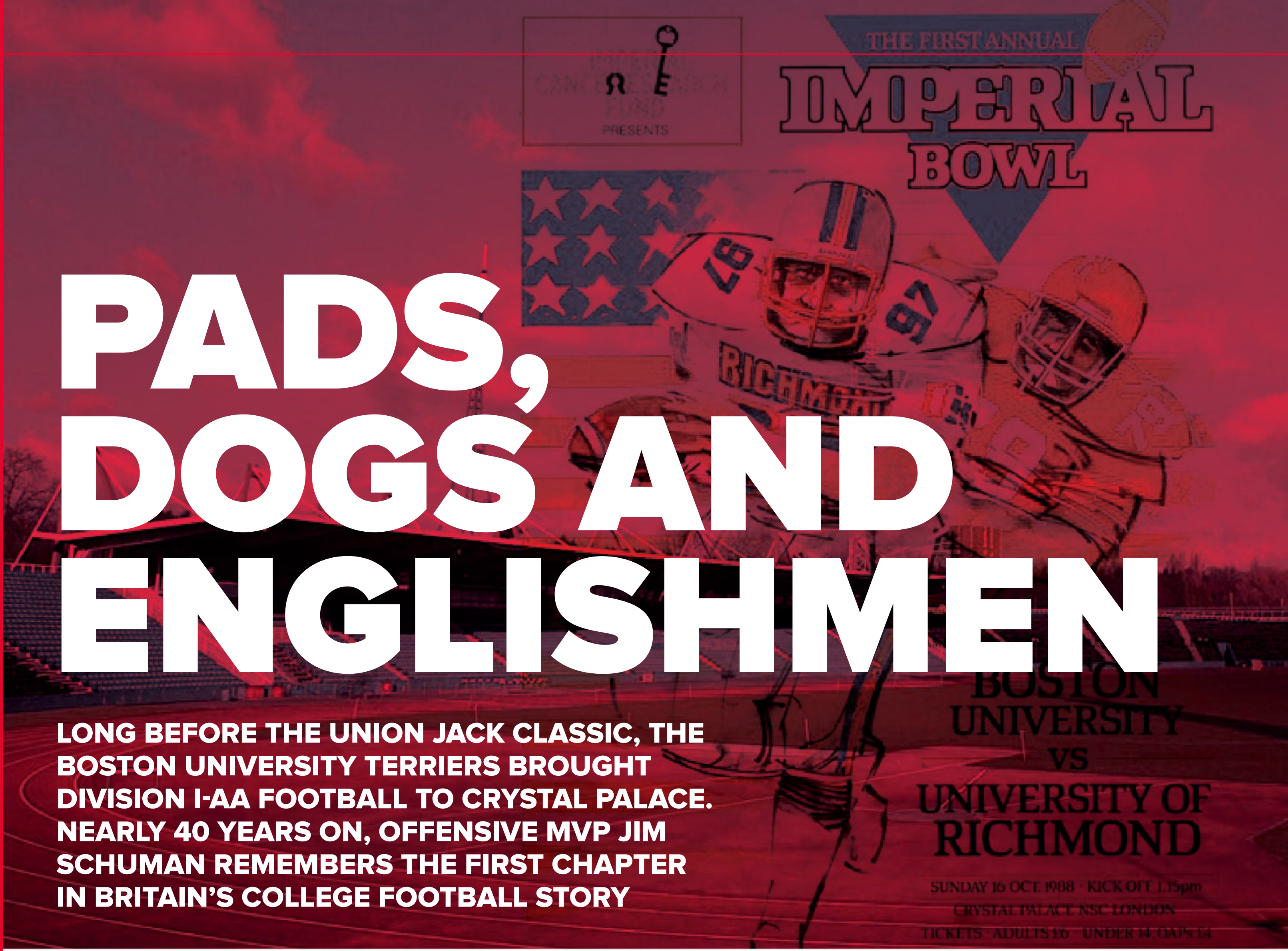
He knows scepticism remains, and understands why, so all he asks for is 'a fair shot', a chance to force coaches to reconsider long-held assumptions, unconvinced that American football truly respects Europe.

"One of the first questions I got asked [on my visit] was, 'Do you know what '11 personnel' is?'," he says. "I kind of laughed at them. Are you serious? Really? I felt that was disrespectful but, to them, it was a genuine question."

Soon, he will have his opportunity to prove that he knows what '11 personnel' is, but the waiting is proving difficult. It's already been longer than any offseason he can remember and Kingdom admits that he's 'itching to play football'. And, as for the emotions when he finally takes the field in a Knights jersey, possibly on September 3rd, as UCF entertain Bethune-Cookman University at the Acrisure 'Bounce House', Kingdom is suddenly lost for words.

"I wish I could tell you," he says eventually. "But I've dreamt about it — and it's pretty cool in the dream."

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SHINE ON: Far from the pomp of Wembley, Crystal Palace National Sports Centre (above) hosted the UK's first US college game.

PADS, DOGS AND ENGLISHMEN

LONG BEFORE THE UNION JACK CLASSIC, THE BOSTON UNIVERSITY TERRIERS BROUGHT DIVISION I-AA FOOTBALL TO CRYSTAL PALACE. NEARLY 40 YEARS ON, OFFENSIVE MVP JIM SCHUMAN REMEMBERS THE FIRST CHAPTER IN BRITAIN'S COLLEGE FOOTBALL STORY

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International interest in America's favourite game has likely never been higher. This year will see the NFL host a record nine overseas games across seven cities and four continents. But, as the NFL becomes a global sport, some of the elements that made it so popular have been lost along the way. Consequently, more and more people are turning to college football to get their fix. The colours, sounds, fanbases and rivalries are passionate and raw, and fans are finally starting to realise what they have been missing.

This September sees London's Wembley Stadium host the Arizona State Sun Devils as they take on the Kansas Jayhawks. In front of a potential 90,000 fans, two historic programmes will face off in a legitimate Big 12 conference battle that promises to be a spectacle unlike anything Wembley has seen before.

It will be a game of firsts. The iconic venue's first college football game. The first of a series of 'Union Jack Classics'. The first FBS match-up in the UK. However, it *won't* be the first time college football has made the trip to London.

* * *

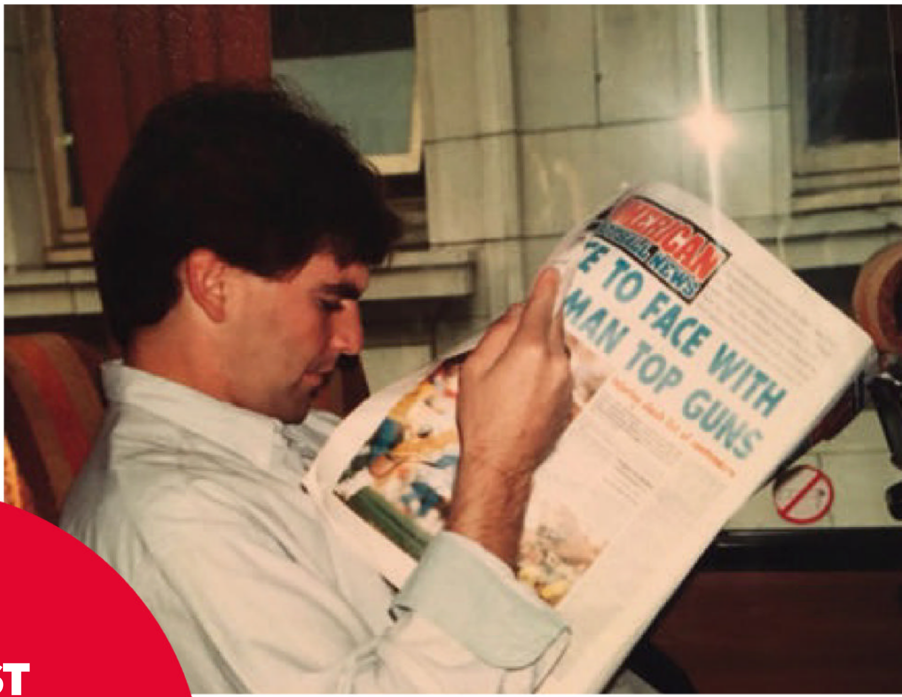
Crystal Palace National Sports Centre in south London is never going to compare itself to Wembley but, back in 1988, it played host to 6,000 fans who turned out to watch Europe's first college game. On that occasion, the Richmond Spiders defeated Yankee Conference rivals Boston University 20-17 in the first — and, sadly, only — Imperial Bowl. Despite the defeat, Terriers quarterback Jim Schuman was named as the game's offensive MVP.

In what turned out to be one of his final football games, the fifth-year senior helped to put on a show for the '6,000-or-so curious onlookers' in the 'cold and fog of an English afternoon', as the *Boston Globe* put it at the time. Now, ahead of the inaugural Union Jack Classic, Schuman finds himself experiencing a full-circle moment as, due to family connections, he has taken an interest in Arizona State's sports teams in recent years, and their football team in particular. From the offensive MVP of the first college game in the UK to, almost 40 years later, following one of the teams taking the field at Wembley is quite the story.

The trip to London came as a bit of a surprise to Schuman and his team-mates when the schedule was announced in the preseason, however.

"Normally, in college football, at least back then, they scheduled opponents three, four or five years in advance," he explained to *Gridiron*. "But, when I was a senior, my [penultimate] year, they hadn't released a schedule for the following season as expected. Then, all of a sudden, the schedule came out — and we noticed that we were going to go to London!

"My first football game ever was in Yankee Stadium. And one of my last was in Crystal Palace. To this day, the first passport that I ever got was for this trip to go to London in 1988."



BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY: Jim Schuman (above) relaxes on his way to the game.

> "THE FIRST PASSPORT THAT I EVER GOT WAS FOR THIS TRIP TO GO TO LONDON IN 1988

Schuman was somewhat fortunate to even be on the roster for the game, however, having earned an extra year of eligibility — and the 1988 season witnessed changes in the set-up at Boston that ended up playing to his strengths.

"I was a fifth-year senior," he revealed. "In college football, if you get injured, you can get another year to come back and play. I had gotten hurt in my third year, so I got a redshirt year but, at that time, the coach was let go, and they were bringing in a new coaching staff with the promise of becoming what they called a 'run-and-shoot' offense, where you're prone to throwing the ball. My coach, Chris Palmer, came from a professional background, so I was excited. I had already graduated academically, but I had one year of eligibility, so I chose to come back and play."

Palmer's experience was wide-ranging, having coached in the USFL — where he mentored the likes of Doug Flutie and Herschel Walker at Donald Trump's New Jersey Generals — before leading Boston University. After his years in the college game, Palmer would go on to spend time on the coaching staffs of ten different NFL franchises, including as a quarterback coach for the New York Giants during their Super Bowl XLII winning season.

"Leading up to the season, we had to do a fitness test, and [Coach Palmer] is like, 'Pass this test, otherwise you can just pack your bags and go back to New York'," Schuman said, revealing a rocky start to their relationship. "We didn't hit it off well, but I passed the test, the season started and we had a great opening game."

Schuman threw four touchdown passes and recorded 260 yards as Boston won 41-16 at the University of Rhode Island, but victories were much harder to come by as the season progressed.

"We lost a very close second game and a close third game — and then we went up to the University of Maine to play them in the snow, the cold, and the rain," the quarterback recalled. "My right wrist got stepped on right before half-time, and [the coaching staff] thought I might have broken a few bones in there, so I didn't play the rest of the game. Because of that, leading into the London game, I went over there as a back-up. I wasn't even scheduled to play."

* * *

The Collegian — a newspaper published by the University of Richmond, Boston's opponents in London — carried an article a few months before the overseas venture announcing the game and citing that it was taking place for 'charitable, marketing and sponsorship reasons', before stating that 'proceeds from the game will be donated to the Imperial Cancer Society Research Fund, the largest charity organisation in Europe'.

USA Today International and Pan American Airlines both sponsored and contributed funds to the event, which meant that the trip 'was of minimal expense to the universities', and Dal Shealy, Richmond's head coach, saw additional benefit for his players, and the sport as a whole, arguing that 'it will be a great educational and cultural experience for us, and the trip will upgrade [Richmond's] image, the Yankee Conference's image and Division I-AA football's image".

The teams flew out on the Tuesday prior to Sunday's game, so there was an opportunity to explore the capital away from football.

"I remember we saw the changing of the guard, and we saw Big Ben, but one thing I really remember is staying in Piccadilly Circus which, to me, is the equivalent of Times Square, New York City," Schuman, a Big Apple native, said, digging deep into his memory. "If I remember correctly, one of the players from the University of Richmond, I don't know why, was carrying around a lot of cash with him, got robbed in Piccadilly Circus and lost something like $300.

FOOT RACE: Boston University QB Jim Schuman came off the bench to win MVP in the Imperial Bowl.

"I do remember going to a local pub a night or two before the game, and I was allowed to see my family just for a little while. The whole family had booked a trip — they were coming from New York and were going to spend a week over in London — so we had a drink at the local pub. But the trip did go by so quickly".

* * *

Having ticked off London's sights, the Boston team regrouped ahead of the game against Richmond. The focus was now on south London and Crystal Palace National Sports Centre.

"I think we were allowed to go to Crystal Palace the day before the game to walk around and get used to it — they call it a walk-through," Schuman noted. "It was described [to us] as the finest, all-purpose athletic complex at that time in Great Britain. The grass field on which the game was played was primarily for soccer, and was also the outfield for track [athletics]. I remember finding it odd that, when you walked off the field, you had the bench but then you had, I don't know, seven or eight lanes of the track. And then, even further away, were the stands. Back in the States, the field goes right up to the stadium in most places, so this was quite a big separation, which I felt was kind of odd."

The gap between the action and those enjoying it from a distance did not prevent Schuman picking out some familiar faces, however.

"According to our media guy, there was an announced attendance of 6,000," he said. "I remember that pretty well — and I can remember that I could see my family in the stands."

Still nursing the wrist injury suffered earlier in the season, Schuman travelled to London as the back-up quarterback, knowing that there was every chance that he wouldn't play a snap.

".... but then the other quarterback got hurt," he smiled. "He hurt his ankle in the very first series of the game. I'm put in and had one of my best individual performances."

The switch to the 'run-and-shoot' was a big change for a Boston team historically predicated on the ground game, but played right into Schuman's hands.

"Boston University, leading up to that year, always had great running backs, so, it was definitely more of a running style team," he confirmed. "But then, with this last season, they changed the offense drastically and we went from throwing maybe 50 times over the course of four or five games to throwing the ball 50 times in just one.

"I didn't start [the game], but my stats were 32 of 51 for 381 yards. Thirty-two completions at that time was a record for Boston University, one which I went on to break a few weeks later with 35."

Despite the excellent individual performance, it wasn't enough to end Boston's losing streak, even though, with less than four minutes left in the game, Schuman led a 13-play, 97-yard touchdown drive to put his team up 17-13.

"We took the lead, [but] it was a back-and-forth game," he explained. "We were running out the clock — or trying to just run the ball to kill the clock, to end the game — but we fumbled."

Richmond would go on to convert the turnover into the decisive touchdown to win the game 20-17. The *Boston Globe*, in its game report, put the loss down to Boston's miscues and ill-discipline, rather than Richmond's performance.

"BU gave it away six times yesterday, and all but three of the opponent's points arrived as a direct result of miscues," the recap claimed. "[Richmond] only had one drive longer than 30 yards, and it ended on a missed field goal."

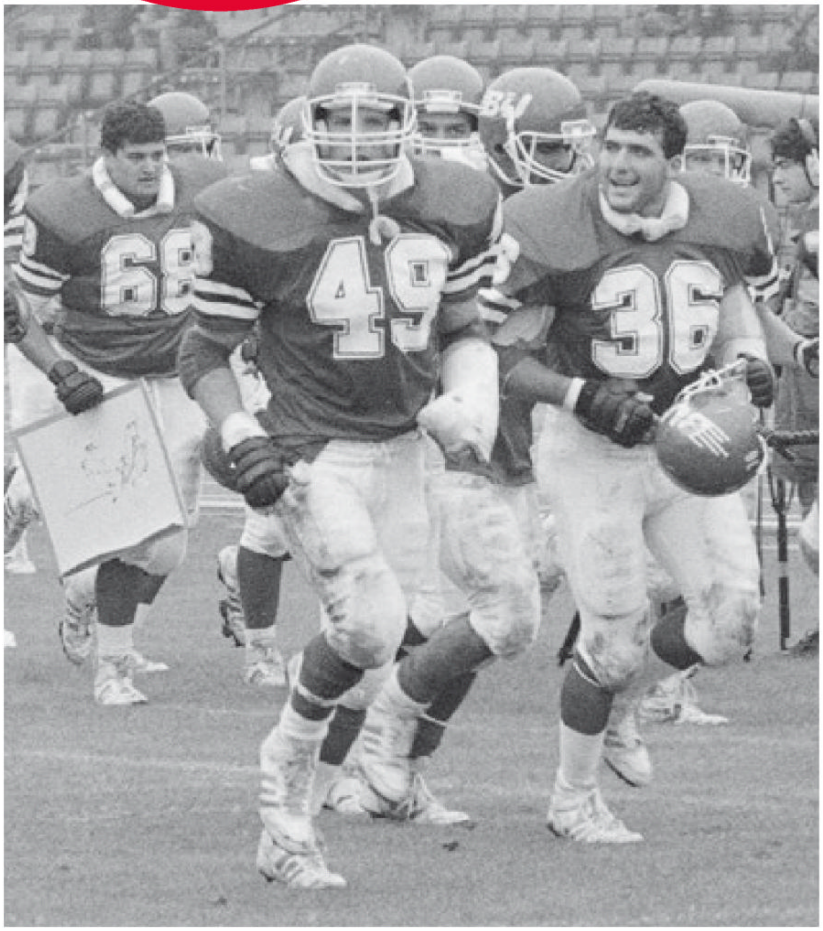
* * *

"IT WAS DESCRIBED [TO US] AS THE FINEST, ALL-PURPOSE ATHLETIC COMPLEX AT THAT TIME IN GREAT BRITAIN

The defensive MVP of the game went to Richmond safety Brian Jordan, a talented multi-sport athlete who Schuman refers to as 'Deion Sanders before Deion Sanders'. Like the Hall-of-Famer, Jordan went on to play for the Atlanta Falcons in the NFL and a host of teams in Major League Baseball. Meanwhile, without that in his future, Schuman refused to let the result of one of his final games taint the experience of playing in London.

"At that point in time, we were 1-3," he explained. "So here we are. We lost another game, so any aspiration of winning the league or going to any type of playoffs was all out the window [anyway]."

For his efforts, however, Schuman was named as the offensive MVP of the first-ever competitive college football game in Europe, and it's a recognition he continues to cherish.



DOG DAYS: The Boston University Terriers, in equipment that belies the 1980s, leave the field at Crystal Palace.

"I vaguely remember going into the locker room after the game and then coming back out on the field to get presented with that award — and I've managed to save that award to this day," he revealed. "We lost our house in Texas in 2017 to Hurricane Harvey due to the flooding. I lost most of, not only personal memorabilia, but most any type of football memorabilia. But, to this day, I still have that plaque. I still have my helmet and the jersey I wore for that game as well."

* * *

With the 90,000-capacity Wembley Stadium hosting this year's inaugural Union Jack Classic, it highlights just how far interest in the game of football has come since 6,000 onlookers watched Richmond defeat Boston at a foggy Crystal Palace, and Schuman is excited to see what develops from the UJC initiative.

"I think, if this game does fairly well, I would envision one college football game a year being played in London — or maybe they move one of the bowl games over," he mused. "I don't know how Arizona State and Kansas ended up landing [the fixture], just like I don't know how they ended up selecting the University of Richmond or Boston University, but good luck to them."

The NFL's push to expand its global reach has played a significant role in building the appetite for overseas games. Ireland has been a successful host of college games for over a decade, with Boston College and Notre Dame amongst those making multiple appearances on the Emerald Isle. Notably, both are schools with a strong, loyal following, as well as historical links to the Irish Catholic population. Having seen the Dublin games take off, and seen the success achieved by the NFL in London, Europe and beyond, college football has clearly decided that now is the right time to tap into the same market.

"I guess the big difference would be that it was sort of an introduction at that time in 1988, but it was still sponsored by a major US publication in *USA Today*," Schuman said. "Now, it's more of a sign of the times, where it's two major colleges playing in a much bigger venue."

* * *

Jim Schuman's ties to this story run deeper than just a flying visit to Crystal Palace in the late Eighties. With family connections to both London and Arizona State University, the event in September carries a little more significance than usual.

"I really started to follow [Arizona State's] sports teams, especially the football team and, when I saw this game was announced on the schedule, that's when I decided to reach out to the athletic department to see about the possibility of tickets — but to also see if anyone would be interested in the story of how the first ever college game in London was played."

From a young quarterback in the Yankee Conference to a foggy afternoon in south London, there is a chance that the offensive MVP of the first college football game played in England is sitting in the stands at Wembley almost four decades after his first football visit.

THE TOP 25 FOR 2026

For the last few years *Gridiron*'s college guru has compiled a top 25 ranking for the following year's draft and it not only provides an idea of the more highly-regarded players heading into a new season but also underlines the fluctuating nature of college football and how some prospects can fall away, for whatever reason. In 2025, twelve of that top 25 ended up going in round one of the following year's draft, with six in the top ten. In all, 16 went in the top 55, with five more returning to school. This last year, we tabbed another 12 first-rounders, including four of the top seven — featuring first overall pick Fernando Mendoza at #6 — and 17 of the top 60, with a further four players going back to college.

With the BLESTO and National lists having been released, and amid much talking to scouts and watching of film, these are the top 25 players as it stands in June, ahead of what looks to be a draft for the ages, with at least four super blue-chip players and, depending on where this remarkable QB class ends up, potentially a lot more.

SIMON CLANCY

LEAD FEATURE WRITER

@SiClancy

1. JEREMIAH SMITH

WR, OHIO STATE

The premier player in the draft as we enter the summer stretch, Smith will receive an enormous grade if he continues to play as he has as a freshman and sophomore. We're all prisoners of the moment, and it feels hyperbolic to even mention the like of Calvin Johnson and Julio Jones, but that's where Smith could end up. It's hard to isolate a flaw in his game: he's so big and strong, explodes off the line, has instant acceleration, runs good routes and creates late space down the sideline. It's long seemed men against boys with Smith, and that won't change this season.

2. DYLAN STEWART

EDGE, SOUTH CAROLINA

Possessing some of the most incredible bend and lateral movement, Stewart is just a different type of animal. With an incredible first step and the kind of teleportation ability only seen with Myles Garrett and Micah Parsons, he's remarkably explosive, able to immediately threaten the integrity of the pocket with speed, power and a frightening wingspan that he uses to keep himself clean. He also uses his hands well, especially inside to lift tackles back into the QB, and, when he fully extends against the run and rips off to make stuffs, it adds a frightening dimension to his game. His ceiling is enormous.

OHIO STATE
BIG
GOODYEAR COTTON BOWL

3. LEONARD MOORE

CB, NOTRE DAME

Much like Jeremiah Smith, Moore has been an NFL player-in-waiting since his freshman season. Long at 6'2", he has the ability to play on the perimeter, in the slot or to travel with the opponent's best receiver — as he did to devastating shutdown effect against USC's Makai Lemon last season. He's fast, narrows throwing windows on the outside, plays with great discipline, always locates the ball and understands how to win with leverage underneath. You just don't overthink players of potential Derek Stingley/Patrick Surtain calibre.

4. ARCH MANNING

QB, TEXAS

Neither Trevor Lawrence or Andrew Luck had to deal with the sorts of conversation Manning has to, simply because of his family name. The Texas QB isn't the finished product, and there have been bumps along the way, but he played some big-time ball down the stretch to set up a fascinating 2026 campaign. He has a strong arm, is extremely athletic and possesses an NFL-ready understanding of how to manipulate the pocket to make second-and-third-reaction completions. He's accurate to all three levels, can throw with touch and he never wilts under the pressure of a cloudy pocket.

5. DANTE MOORE

QB, OREGON

The former #3 overall recruit in the 2023 class, Moore is a pure thrower and would almost certainly have been a top five pick had he declared in April. He has a strong arm, works well high to low, rarely puts the ball in harm's way and, as a post-snap processor, is strong, although could use his eyes in a more productive way instead of sometimes staring down his receiver. But Moore plays with cool and poise, is deadly up the seam or outside the numbers and he has the wheels to change the platform and extend plays.

6. KYNGSTONN VILIAMU-ASA

LB, NOTRE DAME

KVA, as he's known, is a high-level athlete with ability to play off-ball linebacker or edge, a la Arvell Reese. Physical, consistently in the backfield and with proven ability to get to the quarterback from wherever he lines up, he has more than enough speed to play sideline-to-sideline. As a pure linebacker, he's quick to trigger downhill, violent taking on blocks and loves to hit. As a pass rusher, he has real bend, the ability to flatten and chase and is a relentless athlete. However, he has had two ACL tears.

7. CAM COLEMAN

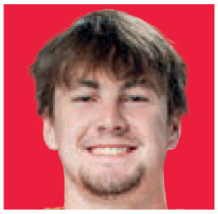
WR, TEXAS

A legit top ten pick, it feels like Coleman's only beginning to scratch the surface. Having suffered mediocre quarterback play at Auburn, with a lot of 'what might have beens' on his 2025 tape, he should be able to replicate his 93 receptions over two seasons in just one if he and Arch Manning can click. Another in class who's big, long and physical, he's got deep speed and can win spectacularly above the rim or in contested-catch situations, so it'll be interesting to see how he manages in Kyle Flood's more varied pro-style scheme.

8. DARIAN MENSAH

QB, MIAMI

Hoping to follow in the footsteps of Cam Ward and parlay transferring to Miami into a high draft position, Mensah was already a likely Day 2 prospect at Tulane and Duke. Over the last five years, just 20 draft-eligible QBs have had a 30+ TD, sub-10 interception season at the Power 4 level, and nine of them went on to be first-rounders. Last season, Mensah had 34 scores and six. The sky could be the limit for a passer who is accurate, has a powerful arm and was dominant in the spring.



9. DREW MESTEMAKER

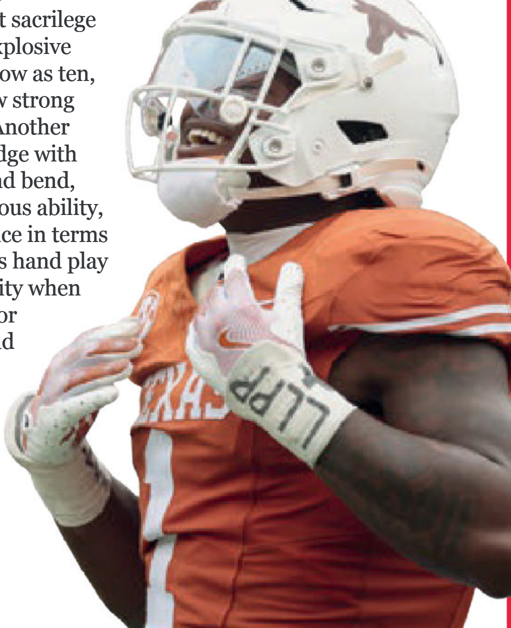
QB, OKLAHOMA STATE

Mestemaker, astonishingly, didn't start a game in high school, where he was the back-up QB, safety and punter. As a zero-star prospect, it will be interesting to see if the step up to Power 4 level is too much for him, but his big arm, pocket manoeuvres and ability to win out of structure should see him push hard to go in the top five at worst. Of note is the fact that one scouting service has a very, very high grade on him.

10. COLIN SIMMONS

EDGE, TEXAS

It feels almost sacrilege to have the explosive Simmons as low as ten, but that's how strong this class is. Another electrifying edge with serious athletic traits, twitch, burst and bend, he's a little undersized but has ridiculous ability, a non-stop motor and some real nuance in terms of how he goes about his business. His hand play is excellent and he shows real versatility when asked to drop off as a cover defender or operate as a spy, flashing good FBI and excellent lateral quicks. Could be stronger, especially as an edge-setter against the run.



11. JORDAN SEATON

LT, LSU

Stepping up in class, Seaton moves to Death Valley from Colorado having given up just seven pressures last season. If he can handle the SEC, he should be a lock to go top ten. He plays very well under control but can suddenly explode to jump his man. Outstanding as a vertical setter against speed, he can bend, mirror and match up the arc and, when he gets his hands on guys, it's over. Displays a great fake punch which discombobulates opponents, and it's rare to see a human this size moves this well.

12. WILL ECHOLES

DT, OLE MISS

A former standout offensive lineman in high school, Echoles was recruited to play defense at Ole Miss, and it paid off as he's become probably the most complete interior defensive lineman in the draft. He has small-man movement ability in a 6'3", 316lb frame and plays with outstanding strength, balance, hustle and explosion. His lateral quickness and ability to change direction for a man of his size is frightening and, if you watch him pancake the Arkansas center before chasing down a quarterback almost 100lbs lighter than him last year, you know there's a special talent there.

13. LANORRIS SELLERS

QB, SOUTH CAROLINA

Sellers enters his third season as starting QB for the Gamecocks, yet remains a developmental prospect. However, the athletic skillset and elite escapability are different to almost anyone in the draft, with Josh Allen vibes regarding traits, size, arm talent and how he moves. A true dual threat in the Cam Newton mould, there's a lot to clean up and learn, having taken every snap from the 'gun in a heavy RPO offense with a lot of low-tariff throws. Development in 2025 was stark and new OC Kendal Briles should continue to elevate his game.

14. AHMAD MOTEN SR

DT, MIAMI

Having thrived with the edge duo of first-rounders Akheem Mesidor and Reuben Bain Jr, Miami have another pair, albeit on the interior of the line, with junior Justin Scott and Moten. A dominant force in Miami's playoff run last season, and the best player in the National Championship Game, Moten is twitchy, with great traits, plays with elite pad level and has speed of movement early in the down to consistently win using violent hands and fast feet. Although he's only flashed for a season, mainly as a penetrating three-technique, there's some appealing alignment versatility too.

15. ELLIS ROBINSON IV

CB, GEORGIA

Robinson is a fascinating prospect who loves to come downhill and smack runners in the mouth with an aggressive, front-foot style of play. He's a very smooth mover with electric hips, the patience to force opponents to make their move before he opens his own gate, and has an absolute flight radar for the ball. Lacks elite speed down the field, and can sometimes be found fighting to stay in trail, but does have outstanding short area burst and recovery quicks. He's also versatile enough to play man or zone, but really thrives as a press-man corner.

16. DAVID STONE

DT, OKLAHOMA

Stone has more than enough juice to draft high after a breakout season where he featured across the Sooners front. He can be a powerful 0T, an explosive 3T or even line up outside at end, where he offers a difficult out for a tackle, especially when shaded as a 4i. There's toughness, strength, physicality and outstanding balance, paired with the vision to hunt down the play. If he can increase his sack numbers — 2.5 in 2025 — and combine that with his run-stuffing qualities, he has a chance to be the first defensive tackle off the board.

17. TREY'DEZ GREEN

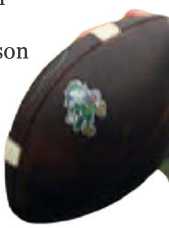
TE, LSU

The 2026 tight end class looks pretty strong, but it's LSU's Green who's currently number one. A physically gifted and dynamic athlete at almost 6'7", with the wingspan of a pterodactyl and ability to line up across the formation to stress defenses. He's a remarkably tough out for defenders in-route, at the catch point and after the grab, where he's a real weapon. There are a lot of balls to go round in Lane Kiffin's offense, but he should be on the receiving end of plenty of them.

18. TREVOR GOOSBY

LT, TEXAS

The Longhorns have a pair of bookend tackles in Goosby and Melvin Siani protecting Arch Manning, and the former is coming off a strong first season replacing Saints' 2025 first-rounder Kelvin Banks. Extremely well put together at 6'7", 325lbs, he offers reminders of Miami's improving LT Patrick Paul. Despite a tendency to play too high and hardly an elite lateral mover, Goosby has powerful hands and punishes linebackers at the second level. If he can play as he did against Texas Tech, where he dominated Cashius Howell, then he'll go significantly higher than 17th.



19. TEITUM TUIOTI

EDGE, OREGON

In an excellent edge group, where any number could end up in the first round next April, the underrated Tuioti was an absolute stud for the Ducks as a stand-up outside linebacker opposite Matayo Uiagalelei, finishing with 9.5 sacks, 16 TfLs and weighing in as a hugely effective edge setter in the run game. Not necessarily a speed guy, Tuioti is more of a true power rusher who has versatility, strength and an utterly relentless nature, showcasing the sort of down-to-down consistency that the NFL cherishes.

20. QUINCY RHODES JR

DE, ARKANSAS

Rhodes is another physical freak at 6'6", 278lbs, but moves like he's 30lbs lighter. He sat behind Landon Jackson for two seasons but exploded in 2025 and almost declared, choosing instead to return under a new regime that includes outstanding DL coaches Kynjee' Cotton and Landius Wilkerson. Possessing terrific get-off, he's big and long, with long arms, extreme physicality and is a tough out against the run. Regarded as a hard-working team leader who never takes a down off, his inside spin move is a thing of beauty.

21. C.J. CARR

QB, NOTRE DAME

The sixth quarterback on this list — and we haven't even mentioned Brendan Sorsby (eligibility notwithstanding), Trinidad Chambliss, Drake Lindsey, Jayden Maiava, Julian Sayin, or C.J. Bailey — Carr is extremely well liked in NFL circles, even though he's just a redshirt sophomore with a single season of starts under his belt. A cerebral player who processes well, plays soundly under pressure, can work a cloudy pocket and has enough athletic ability to extend the play and change the throwing platform, Carr is eligible to declare — but possibly won't.

22. CAYDEN GREEN

OG, MISSOURI

A rare breed as a guard who moved out to left tackle after Armand Membou declared for the 2025 draft, Green has played at a level which hasn't affected his draft status one bit. Well put together, technically sound — albeit learning to keep his pad level down — he gets off the ball well and can consistently dig out his man in the run game. Also very good at executing reach or backside cutoff blocks, he can climb and destroy at the second level and has a terrific anchor as a pass protector inside, winning consistently with precision-guided hands.

23. NICK MARSH

WR, INDIANA

The highly-regarded Michigan State transfer might easily swap places with a dozen or so peers, including his own Indiana team-mate Charlie Becker, but is big and strong, a very good route runner and extremely good after the catch. Scouts love the fact that, despite playing in a mediocre offense in East Lansing, he was a tough out as a perimeter blocker in the run game. With Josh Hoover coming over from TCU to replace Fernando Mendoza, Marsh has the platform to put himself into the WR1 mix.

24. MATEEN IBIROGBA

DT, TEXAS TECH

The number one interior defensive lineman in the 2026 portal, the Wake Forest transfer has some freakish athletic ability for his size. There's serious first step quickness and explosive twitch that means he's able to stress a pocket in an instant as a relentless interior rush threat who can dominate on late downs. Inexperienced coming out of high school as an unrated recruit, Ibirogba actually began his career at Georgetown and is still very raw, but knows where the quarterback is. And NFL teams are high on him.

25. AMARE CAMPBELL

LB, TENNESSEE

There are certain players who stand out on tape, even though nobody else is talking about them. This time last year, it was Sonny Styles, and Campbell — whilst not quite in the same class — has legitimate first-round upside. A Penn State transfer who grew up playing basketball between 5-14, Campbell is fast, instinctive, flashes elite quickness to get to landmarks and runs past team-mates to get to the ball carrier. An outstanding run defender and a terrific tackler, he's an NFL green dot linebacker in waiting.

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